THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE

E·PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF
CALIFORNIA

THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE

THE NOVELS OF

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

The Illustrious Prince

Jeanne of the Marshes

A Prince of Sinners

Anna the Adventuress

The Master Mummer

A Maker of History

Mysterious Mr. Sabin

The Yellow Crayon

The Betrayal

The Traitors

Enoch Strone

A Sleeping Memory

The Malefactor

A Lost Leader

The Great Secret

The Avenger

As a Man Lives

The Long Arm of Mannister

The Missioner

The Governors

The Man and His Kingdom

A Millionaire of Yesterday

THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AUTHOR OF

"A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY," "A MAKER OF HISTORY,"
"THE GREAT SECRET," "THE AVENGER," ETC.

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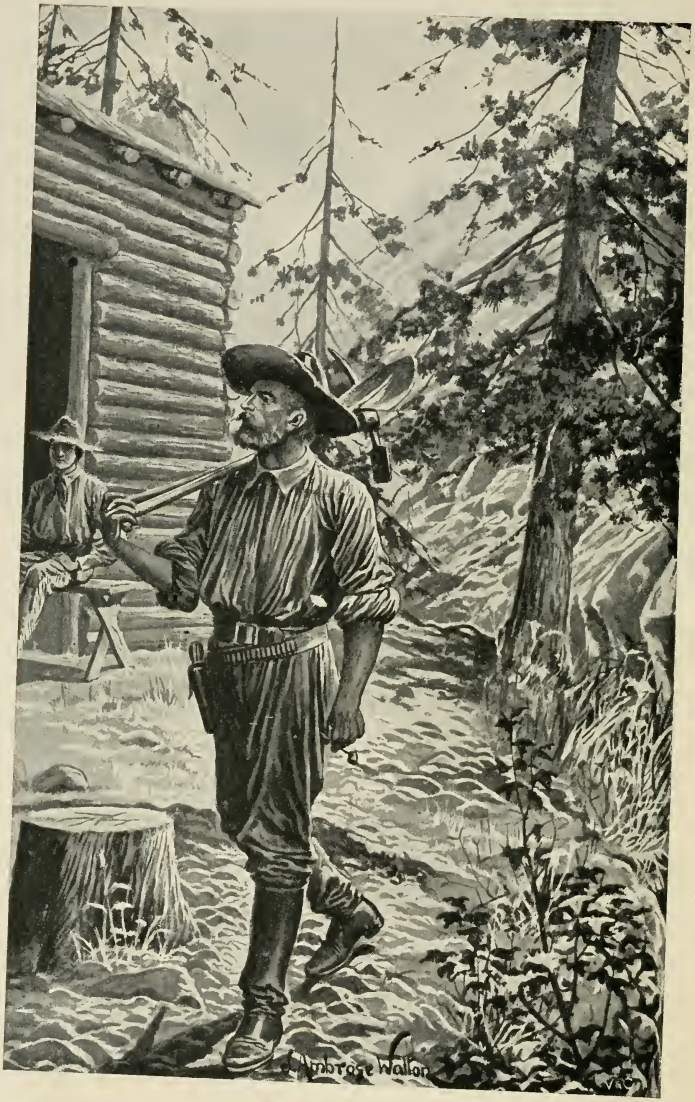

"He strode down the gorge to the river bed."

The World's Great Snare] [*Frontispiece*

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THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

TWO SLEPT, AND ONE WATCHED

"At last!" muttered Mr. James Hamilton, opening his eyes and sitting upright on the floor. "Get up, you chaps! D'ye hear? Get up!"

No one stirred. As a matter of fact, neither of the other two men was awake. With a final yawn the speaker stretched himself out and staggered to his feet. Then he threw himself upon a rude wooden bench, picked up the stump of a corn-cob pipe which lay upon the ground, and smoked, with his elbows resting upon the empty window-frame, and his head stretched as far as possible outside. The dull stolidity of his features was quickened for the moment into the semblance of eagerness. He was waiting to inhale the faint quivering breeze which was stealing down from the hills.

"At last!" he growled, with his eyes, dim and bloodshot, turned towards the western sky. "What a hell of a day! There she goes, and be d——d to her!"

The rim of a red, burning sun had touched at last the highest peak of a low range of pine-topped hills crawling around the base of the Sierras. All day long, the heat in

the valley and across that level stretch of rocky, broken country lying eastwards, had scorched the earth, dried up the watercourses, and very nearly turned the brains of those few dwellers around the banks of the Blue River. Work had been given up as a thing impossible. Down below where, around the bed of the old river, a score or so of gold claims had been staked out by a little band of eager workers, reigned a deep, absolute stillness. Pickaxes, washers, pans, and all sorts of mining tools were lying about unused. Not a man had dared to breathe the burning heat and stifling air of the valley. Apart, they might have been borne for a brief while, at any rate; together, they meant fever, deadly and virulent.

After a while, Mr. James Hamilton withdrew his head from the window-frame, and cast a grim look into the interior of the shanty. Save for its occupants, it did not afford much scope for investigation, nor was there anything in its appointments which could have offended the instincts of the most rigid ascetic. On a table constructed of a couple of broad planks from which the underneath bark had not been stripped, supported upon a barrel at either end, were scattered a dirty pack of cards, two tin mugs turned upside down, and a black bottle rolling on its side. The walls were perfectly bare, and a strong woody odour, and the tricklings of pine sap upon the rafters, showed that the shanty had only recently been put together. The whole of the floor seemed to be taken up by the two men who lay there fast asleep.

It was upon the face of the one nearest to him that Mr. James Hamilton's attention seemed fixed. With his hands on his knees, and his pipe between his teeth, he leaned forward, watching him with a steady, expressionless scrutiny. If the sleeping man had suddenly awakened, there was nothing in the look to terrify or even surprise him. It

was simply the steady, critical survey of a man who desires to impress certain features and lineaments in his memory, or compare them with some previous association.

They were all three big men, with brawny limbs and muscles hardened and distended by physical labour, but the man who slept so soundly was almost a giant. His head, massive and tawny-bearded, was propped up against the opposite wall. One huge arm, naked to the shoulder, was passed underneath it, and the other, stretched out perfectly straight, reached the doorway. One of his feet, bare and brown, rested upon an overturned bucket; the leg, extended at full length, seemed in the tiny cabin like the limb of a giant. A red flannel shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, revealed a mighty chest, curiously white. His trousers, of coarse linen, were rolled up to the knees, and although stained and discoloured, showed traces of constant efforts at cleaning.

Mr. James Hamilton, whose eyes had been noting this amongst many other things, suffered for the first time a shade to pass across his face. He gave vent to his feelings in an expressive grunt, and spat upon the floor.

After that first futile summons, he seemed in no hurry to awaken his comrades. Withdrawing his eyes at last from the man who lay stretched at his feet, he carefully stepped over his body, and lounged to the doorway. The frail structure creaked with his weight as he leaned against the side, for Mr. James Hamilton himself was a fourteen-stone man, but he made himself comfortable there and folded his arms, smoking steadily, and watching the dull red ball of sun sink behind the hills. Unconsciously he contributed one more, and a necessary figure, to the dramatic completeness of the scene.

Down from the hills stole the softly-descending darkness. There was none of the lingering twilight of an English

summer. Swift shadows moved ghostlike across their bare brown sides, and hung about the valley, and the colour stole into a white moon hung in a deep blue sky. A breeze, long desired and grateful, swept through the army of pines which crowned the sheer hill behind the cabin, hanging on to its ledges and crevices, and growing out in places almost at right angles to the precipice below. Mr. James Hamilton took off his apology for a hat, and pushed his hair back from his head, to taste as much of its sweetness as he could. He even glanced over his shoulder into the cabin, and seemed to contemplate another attempt at arousing his companions. But, although he went so far as to remove his pipe from his teeth, he did not at once speak to them.

"I reckon this is the darnedest, loneliest, saddest hole I ever came across!" he muttered to himself, gazing away from the valley and the shadow-crowned hills to where a great rolling expanse of broken country surged away to the eastern horizon. Mr. Hamilton's artistic education had been neglected, and he saw no beauty in the fantastic panorama of shadowland, the lone clumps of alder-trees and bushes the very leaves of which seemed like elegant tracing against the deep clear sky, and the faint blue haze mingling with the deeper twilight. His regretful thoughts at that moment were fixed upon a certain pine-board saloon a few hundred miles beyond that uncertain line where the rolling plain touched the sky, and the music of the quivering breeze amongst the pines fell upon dull, unappreciative ears. The fact undoubtedly was, that Mr. James Hamilton was sharing a similar sensation to that which a goodly proportion of his fellow-creatures, steeped to the finger-tips in Eastern civilization, encounter every day. He was bored! The absence of kindred spirits, the enforced temperance of hard work, and, as he expressed it, the cursed loneliness of the place, were becoming insuffer-

able. It was possible, too, that he was a little homesick; for Mr. James Hamilton was not an American, and had not been heard to express any unbounded admiration for that country. The only thing, in fact, which had won his unqualified approval were the oaths, which he had mastered with wonderful facility, and by means of which he was able, as he remarked with constant satisfaction, to express himself as a gentleman.

Yet, although he was unaware of it, the loneliness was not quite so complete as he had imagined. Away across the broken plain, the figure of a human being was slowly limping and crawling along the rough track towards the valley; a human being in the direst and most pitiful of straits. As yet, all signs of the little settlement and the river were hidden from him. He was in a vast lonely stretch of barren country, with the great hills in front, and no sign of human life or habitation to break the deep serene silence. Every now and then a moan broke from the white parched lips, a low despairing moan of pain and deep physical exhaustion, and more than once in the short space of a hundred yards, he threw up his arms and sank down upon the ground. He was dressed in the roughest of cowboy's clothes stained with sun and water, and torn almost to rags by the bushes of the forests. His face was worn to a shadow, and black rims were under the deep-set eyes bright with the gleam of famine. The feet were bare and stained with blood, and the hands were cut and bruised. And with it all he seemed to have the look of one utterly unused to such privations. The shape of his limbs was slender, even delicate, and the face, notwithstanding its emaciation and deadly pallor, was curiously handsome. He carried no gun or stick, but a small bundle from which the butt-end of a revolver was sticking out, and as once more his feet gave way beneath him and he sank down, his fingers closed upon it convulsively.

He lay upon his back, and looked up at the stars which were beginning to steal into the sky. For a moment his mind began to wander. Trees and sky and space seemed to be mingling in one confused chaos. Then, setting his teeth and making a great effort, he arrested his fleeting consciousness. He raised his head a little and his lips moved.

"Oh, God! if I could crawl but just a mile — just a mile or two further! I must be near the Blue River now! Yonder are the mountains — that must be the valley! Oh, if only I had the strength!"

He raised himself a little more and looked around despairingly. The deep, majestic stillness of the great pine-clad hills and brooding forests, the solemn silence of night descending slowly upon the land, seemed to stir up a sudden half-frenzied anger in the traveller. Was he to die there in agony, almost within sight of his goal? To die before the yellow light faded from that great moon, and the slow-flushing morn paled the eastern skies? Even in his growing weakness, the cruelty of it and the deep, solemn indifference of all inanimate things in the face of his misery, came vividly home to him. With a curious mixture of blasphemy and devotion, he sat up and faintly cursed the distant moonlit hills, the perfumed breeze which fanned his burning forehead, and the far-off sound of a mountain torrent which mocked his dry throat and cracked lips. Then he pulled out his revolver.

"One shot more!" he gasped. "Shall I?"

He looked into the deep barrel, and held it to his forehead, pressing it there so tightly that when his fingers relaxed there was a livid red mark upon his temple. Then he laid it down by his side, and sitting up, sobbed out loud.

"Oh, God help me! God help me!" he moaned. "I daren't die! I'm afraid! Oh, for just a little more strength, only just a little! I must be nearly there!"

He raised himself slowly on to his knees, and leaned forward on his hands. Behind him lay the great desolate plain melting into the sky. In front were the mountains, the deep gorge, the pine-topped hills; and, at their base, though he could not see it, the little shanty where two men slept and one watched.

"I must be near there now!" he gasped. "Very near! One more effort now — one more — and if I fail — I will do it!"

He replaced the revolver in the little bundle, and pushed back the thick hair from his forehead, with a gesture of determination. Then moving, in pain and slowly, on hands and feet, he crept on with his face towards the hills, muttering softly to himself:

"I must not give up! I will — be brave! I will not faint! No! I will not, I will not! How brightly the moon shines through the dark trees, and what strange shadows lie across the plain! Down there must be the valley. Yes, yes; that is where they are. I have come so far — I will not give in! I shall find him. Yes, I shall find him! The ground seems unsteady! it is fancy, fancy! Just beyond those trees — that is where they will be. It is — very near. The breeze is fragrant with the perfume of the pines. It is — only a little further. I shall soon be there — very soon. Ah, what is that? How bright it is! Oh, God! do not mock me. It is a firefly, it must be — a firefly! I will not believe that it is a light. Oh, my head! How giddy I am! I must not give way. I will not! I will not! It is — ah!"

He sprang to his feet, and raised his hands to heaven. A sudden wild joy shook him.

"It is a light — a match!" he shrieked. "I am there!"

Mr. Hamilton's pipe had gone out, and the tobacco was in his host's possession. He turned round and kicked the body of the man nearest to him.

"Hullo!" he cried. "Are you chaps turned into logs? Get up!"

The man more directly addressed opened his eyes, gave a mighty yawn, and staggered to his feet. Then he thrust his head out of the door, and drew a long breath.

"Whew! This is good!" he exclaimed, opening his lungs and breathing in great gulps of the fragrant pine-scented breeze which was blowing softly across the gorge from the forests beyond. "Jim, you idiot, why didn't you wake me before?"

"Not my business!" Mr. Hamilton growled. "Shouldn't have done it now, only I wanted a smoke. Hand over the baccy!"

His host produced a huge pouch from his pocket, filled his own pipe and handed it over. Mr. Hamilton, still lounging in the doorway, leisurely stuffed his corn-cob as full as he could, struck a match, and thereby, in all probability, saved the life of a fellow-creature.

Neither of the men heard the faint despairing cry of the stranger. After smoking for a few moments in silence, they were joined by the third occupant of the shanty. He was a tall, lank man, with grizzled hair, high cheekbones, and clear gray eyes. After his first uprising he stood for a brief while indulging in a succession of yawns. Then he felt for his pipe, snapped his fingers for the tobacco, and, leaning against the wall, smoked in silence.

"Say, pal, how's the liquor?" grunted Mr. Hamilton insinuatingly, a sudden gleam of interest illuminating his classical features. "It's a cussed dry climate!"

His host, who in the little community was generally called the Englishman, stretched out his hand and drew a bottle from a wooden box set on end, which appeared to do duty as a cupboard. He turned it upside down, and contemplated it thoughtfully, smoking all the time.

"Half a bottle," he announced. "All we've got, and no supplies for a week! Guess we'd better thirst!"

"That be d——d!" growled Mr. Hamilton. "This place is as slow as hell, anyhow. Let's share up, and have a game of poker. Chance to-morrow! I shall cut my throat if I don't have a drink!"

The Englishman balanced the bottle thoughtfully in the palm of his hand.

"What do you say, Pete?" he asked, turning to the other man.

The gentleman addressed, Mr. Peter Morrison by name, scratched his head and glanced furtively at the sullen brow and red, bloodshot eyes of the man who lounged in the doorway. The sight seemed to decide him.

"I say let's drink! I saw Dan Cooper this morning, and he allowed there was plenty of stuff left in the store. We shan't have a much drier day than this, anyhow."

"D——d poor stuff that store whisky," muttered the Englishman. "Two against one takes it, though. Down you sit, you chaps! Share up the liquor. Here goes! Jim, deal the pictures!"

The men sat down without a word. In silence they drank and smoked, dealt and shuffled, lost and won. Loquacity was not a popular quality at Blue River diggings, and conversation was a thing almost unheard-of. Only, once Mr. Hamilton brought his fist down upon the frail table, and took his pipe from his mouth.

"You chaps, I'm off next week. Gold-diggin's a frost. D——d if I can stand it any longer. Say, are you coming, Bryan?"

The Englishman shook his head.

"Going to hold on a bit longer," he answered. "Shouldn't half mind it if it wasn't so blazing hot!"

"How about you, Pete?" Mr. Hamilton inquired, turning to the other man.

"I'm in with Bryan," was the quiet reply. "We're pards, you know. Ain't that so, Bryan?"

"Right for you, my man!" was the hearty answer. "Two pairs, aces up! Show your hand, Jim!"

Mr. Hamilton threw down his cards with a string of oaths which even surpassed his usual brilliancy.

"You fellows can stay and rot here," he muttered hoarsely. "Just you wait till the rains come, and see how you like it."

There was no further attempt at conversation. Every now and then Mr. Hamilton swore a deep oath as the cards went against him, which was not often. The Englishman and his partner won or lost without a murmur — the former with real carelessness, the latter with a studied and characteristic nonchalance. Mr. Hamilton was the only one who showed any real interest in the game, and his method of playing, which was a little peculiar, required all his attention.

Outside, the calm of evening deepened into the solemn stillness of night. The moon rose over the pine tops, and the mists floated away down the valley. The breeze dropped, and the trees in the forest were dumb. The three men played steadily on till midnight. Then the Englishman rose up and threw down his cards.

"Out you go, you chaps!" he said shortly. "I've had enough of this, and I'm going to turn in."

The two men rose: Mr. Hamilton grumbling, Morrison as silent as ever. Together they all walked out into the darkness.

"Good night, and be d——d to you!" muttered Mr. Hamilton surlily as he scrambled down the hillside, holding on to the young fir-trees, and every now and then balancing himself with difficulty. "What the devil were you thinking of when you built your shanty up in the clouds?" he

shouted back as at last he reached the bottom. "I'm bruised all over. I'll be shot if I come again."

The Englishman laughed out lustily, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Good night, Jim!" he shouted, his deep bass voice awakening strange echoes as it travelled across the rocky gorge. "Don't know what you want to swear at me for! You've drunk my whisky, and smoked my tobacco, and won my money, you surly beggar, you! Good night, Pete!" he added to his partner in a milder tone. "Be careful how you go, there! You've had as much liquor as you can carry, you have, you idiot!"

He walked a step or two further out, and watched both men gain their shanties. Then he turned round and stood for a moment or two gazing thoughtfully out into the darkness. A sudden impatience had prompted him to get rid of his rough companions, but he had no desire to sleep. The still, starlit night, the faint snowy outline of the distant mountains, the perfume of flowering shrubs, and the night odour of the pines, had quickened his senses and stirred vaguely his inherent love of beauty; so that he was forced to rid himself abruptly of his coarse surroundings and hasten out into the darkness. He leaned against the frail supports of his little dwelling, with folded arms, and dreamed — dreamed of that Eastern world which he had left, and which seemed a thing so far away from this deep majestic solitude. He turned his face towards the plains, and half closed his eyes. His had been a curious and a solitary life; a life oftenest gloomy, yet just once or twice bathed in a very bright light. It was something to think about — these brighter places so few and far between. Did he wish that he was back again where they would be once more possible? He scarcely knew! The fierce trouble and the disquiet of the days behind was no pleasant memory. He looked

across to the mist-topped hills and dark forests, and he felt that they had grown in a measure dear to him. In his heart, this great lonely man with the limbs and sinews of a giant was a poet. He was ignorant of books, and uneducated, but he loved beauty, and he loved nature, and in his way he loved solitude. He was happier here by far than he had been amongst the gilded saloons and cheap haunts of the Western cities. It was only the monotony and the apparent uselessness of his life here that oppressed him. He was a man with a purpose, a purpose which he had followed over land and sea, through cities and lonely places, with a dogged persistence characteristic of the man and of his race. In his expedition here, for the first time he had turned away from it, and the knowledge was beginning to trouble him. The hard physical labour, the glory of his surroundings, the mighty forests and hills broken up into valley, and precipice, and gorge, and all the time overshadowed by that everlasting background of the snow-capped Sierras, these things were all dear to him, and rough and uncultured though he was, they sank deeper into his being day by day, and night by night. He could not have talked about them. Nature had given him the sensibility of the poet and the artist, but education had denied him the use of words with which to express himself. As yet he scarcely appreciated all that he lost. That would come some day.

Suddenly his dreaming was brought to an abrupt termination. His body stiffened, and his hand felt for the revolver in his belt. With the ready instinct of a man used to all sorts of emergencies, he recognized that he was no longer alone. Yonder, almost at his feet, behind that low prickly shrub, a man was lying.

"Who are you?" he asked quickly. "What do you want here? Put up your hands!"

The reply came only in a faint whisper.

"Bryan! Bryan, come and help me! Give me some brandy! I'm almost done! Thank God, I've found you!"

The Englishman stuck his revolver into his belt, and took a giant stride over to the spot.

"Who are you?" he asked, dropping on one knee, "and where, in God's name, have you come from? How do you know my name?"

The figure raised itself a little. The tattered remnants of a cap fell off, and the moonlight fell upon the wan but strangely handsome face, gleaming in the dark eyes lit up with a sudden eager light.

"Don't you know me, Bryan?" asked a soft, caressing voice. "Am I so altered?"

The Englishman gave a great start, and his bronzed face grew pale.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "It's Myra!"

CHAPTER II

ON THE BANKS OF THE BLUE RIVER

THE moon, which had risen now high above the wood-crowned hills, was shining with a faint ghostly light upon the new-comer's wan face. The Englishman, who had started back like a man who sees a vision, as suddenly recovered himself. Surprising though this advent was, there was no doubt as to the identity of his visitor. Neither was there any doubt but that she was on the point of exhaustion. His first duty was plain. She must be taken care of.

"Can you walk into the cabin, or shall I carry you?" he asked, in a tone as matter-of-fact as though he was accustomed every day to receive such visits. "Better carry you, I think! You look all used up!"

"I — I'm afraid I can't walk, Bryan," she admitted, looking up at him with the ghost of a smile on her lips. "I guess I fainted a bit ago! It was the sound of your voice brought me to!"

Without another word he lifted the prostrate figure into his arms, and carried her into the shanty. Arrived safely inside — he had to bend almost double to enter the doorway — he laid her on his bed, and threw a blanket over her. Then he took up his own tin mug of brandy, found that it was half full, and forced a little between the white lips.

The effect was swift and almost magical. A little faint colour stole into her cheeks, and she opened her eyes.

"Guess I'm starved!" she remarked, with a slight uplifting of the eyelids. "Got anything to eat?"

Her eyes wandered round the place hungrily. The Englishman stood still and considered for a moment. Then he struck a match and lit an oil stove, opened a tin of beef extract, and in a few minutes had a steaming cup full of the liquid. He brought it to her side, and she clutched it eagerly.

"Drink it slowly!" he advised. "That's the style! Good God!"

He went out into the darkness, and returned in a few minutes with a pail of water. Then he turned up his shirt-sleeves, and taking her shapely little feet into his great hands, bathed them carefully while she lay quite still with half closed eyes. When he had finished, he lit his pipe, and sat down by her side.

"Don't hurry, Myra!" he said, leaning back against the wall, and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Don't talk at all unless you feel like it! More beef tea, eh? There, just a drop! That's right!"

He held the cup to her lips, and then set it down.

"If you feel like going right off to sleep, why, off you go!" he said. "You can tell me all about it in the morning!"

He spoke cheerfully, but there was an undercurrent of anxiety in his tone which the girl's quick ears detected. Henceforth she watched him furtively out of her big dark eyes, filled now with a fresh alarm.

"I'd as lief tell you now!" she said. "I'm rested!"

"That's capital! Well, how did you get here all by yourself? That's what I want to know."

A little note of triumph crept into the girl's tone. She

watched her companion carefully to see what effect her words had upon him.

"I came on a mule half the way, Bryan. He died four days ago, and since then I have been walking!"

"You came on a mule!" the Englishman repeated bewildered. "Where from?"

"From San Francisco, of course!"

"My God!"

He looked at her in admiration tempered with wonder. She had expected this, and was gratified.

"Yes! You didn't think I was plucky enough for that, I guess! It's been pretty bad — worse than I thought it would be, when I started. I didn't mind so much until Johnny — that was my mule — died. He seemed sorter company, and he was a real good one. Afterwards it got lonesome, and the nights were so dark and long, I was scared sometimes. I used to lie quite still, with my face turned to the east, and as soon as the first streak of light came I could go to sleep. Then, the day before yesterday, I finished up all the food I had! I don't believe I want to talk about the time since then," she concluded, with a little shiver. "I guess I won't, anyway!"

He sat and looked at her for a moment without speaking. He was not a man of quick comprehension, and the thing amazed him.

"Five hundred miles all alone, and a beastly rough track too," he said at last. "Why, child, it seems impossible. And why on earth have you come?"

The colour rushed into her dusky cheeks, and her eyes, soft and dark now that the gleam of famine had fled, filled with tears.

"You — you are not glad to see me!" she exclaimed piteously.

He was not. That was a fact. But he began to see that

it would not do to let her know it. He swore a great inward oath, but he leaned over and took her hand as tenderly as he could.

"Of course I'm glad, Myra! If you knew how beastly dull it was here, month after month with never a soul to speak to, you wouldn't wonder at that. But what beats me is, why you've come! You haven't risked your life to come to such a picnic as we're having out here! You've got a reason for coming!"

She nodded, with her eyes anxiously fixed upon him.

"Yes! I've brought you something. Guess what!"

His expression changed. A sudden light leaped into his eyes.

"Is it a letter?" he asked.

"Yes."

He held out his hand.

"Where is it?"

"Give me a knife and I will get it," she answered.

He handed her one. She felt up one side of her tattered coat, and cut a little slit near the shoulder. Through the opening she drew a long envelope, and held it out to him; her lips slightly parted, and her eyes eagerly watching for his approval.

He took it into his hand and looked at it almost as though he feared to break the seal. It was yellow with age, and the postmark was ancient. He looked from it into the girl's face. Her eyes were full of tears.

"You are not glad that I brought it," she faltered. "It isn't of any importance after all. You haven't thanked me, you haven't said a single kind word to me, and — and you haven't even kissed me! I — I wish I had died and not got here at all!" she wound up with a little sob.

He passed his arm around her waist and drew her lips to his.

"There, don't cry, Myra," he said kindly. "I'm not an eloquent chap, you know, and I was kind of dazed. You're a regular brick, little woman, to bring me that letter. I don't believe there's another girl in the States would have had so much pluck. Cheer up now, do. Of course I'm glad to see you. You know that."

She listened to him eagerly, and gave a little sigh of relief. Then she swept the tears away, and smiled up at him faintly.

"I think I was pretty glad to have an excuse to come," she whispered in his ear. "I was weary of waiting for you to come back, and — oh, it was all such a bother. I would sooner have died than gone back to the old life, the life from which you saved me, Bryan. It was all horrid. Oh, aren't I glad I'm here! You won't send me back, will you?" she exclaimed, in sudden alarm.

"We'll talk about that in the morning," he answered. "I haven't read my letter yet. I may not be stopping here myself much longer."

"Say that I may stay as long as you do," she persisted. "Tell me that when you go, you will take me with you. Just let me hear you say that, and I won't worry you any more. I'll do everything you tell me. You say that."

He frowned and looked away from her great eager eyes on to the floor. Here was a pretty mess for him! What could he say to her?

"You'll have to be reasonable, Myra," he said slowly. "I don't see how you can stop. What on earth could I do with you? Do you know that there are four or five hundred men down in the valley there, and not a woman amongst them? How could I keep you here?"

"No one would know that I was a woman," she pleaded piteously. "I would never go outside the door, if you like."

"They'd soon find out. They'd want to know why you didn't work, and what was the meaning of those pretty hands and feet," he said indulgently. "No, we couldn't keep the secret if you stayed, Myra. They're a rough lot down there, too, I can tell you. Besides, what on earth would you wear?" he added, with masculine irrelevance.

She glanced down at the rents in her rough attire, and blushed.

"You have a needle and thread here," she said. "I could patch these things up somehow. I — I brought a gown with me in my bundle there, but I suppose I mustn't wear that?"

He shook his head and glanced towards the bundle, which was lying upon the floor half-open. Something he saw seemed to him familiar. He touched it with his foot and leaned forward.

"What dress did you bring?" he asked.

Her eyes sought his appealingly, and the deep colour stained her cheeks. A little tremulous smile parted the corners of her lips.

"It is — the blue serge one, the one you liked. I had put it away until you came back. Kind of silly to bring it, wasn't it?"

He looked at her for a moment, and his own eyes grew misty. The pathos of the whole thing, as he alone could understand it, was irresistibly borne in upon him. Like a swift vision he seemed to see her struggling across that great rocky plain, day after day, night after night, fighting against the horrible loneliness, braving dangers and enduring privations which might have daunted many a man, and all the while clinging to her poor little bundle, never parting with it even in those last dreadful hours of exhaustion and despair. Poor child! He remembered the gown well. It was one which he had bought for her himself, the straight

tailor-made folds pleasing his English eye. He remembered, too, how proud she had been when he had admired it, and how she had worn it on every possible occasion. There it lay before him, carefully folded and rolled up, and carried for more than five hundred miles in the hope that to see her in it might awaken some of that old tenderness which with him, alas! was almost a thing of the past. He looked into her strained, plaintive face, and did what, as yet, of his own accord he had not done or desired to do. He kissed her.

She laughed softly, and glanced up at him from his shoulder, pointing to her clothes.

"Do these things look very awful?"

He affected not to notice the look which pleaded for some consoling speech, and gently detaching himself from her embrace, he stooped down and drew from underneath the plank bed a long white linen coat which he had bought in San Francisco, but had found far too small for him. He shook it, and held it out to her.

"They want stitching, then they'd be all right," he declared. "You'd better put this on for a bit, and try to go to sleep. You've talked more than enough now, and you look deadly tired. Good night."

She sat up and looked at him for a moment, but he kept his head turned resolutely away.

"Where are you — going to sleep?" she asked quietly.

"Outside. I generally do. We are too high up here for the dews to hurt, you know. Call out if you are frightened, or if you want anything. I shall hear you."

"Thank you. Good night, Bryan."

A little break in her voice smote his heart. He thought of the long lonely nights of terror through which she had passed, and he was troubled. He felt a brute. For a

moment he hesitated. Then he took one swift step across to her side, and kissed her tenderly.

"Good night, Myra," he said. "God bless you!"

She laughed a little. Blessings sounded oddly in her ears, but the kiss was more like old times. So she did her best to console herself with it, slipping off her soiled clothes and curling herself up on the bed. In a few moments she was asleep.

It was the end of her pilgrimage. She had risked her life, had faced a loneliness as awful as the loneliness of death, and had cheerfully borne the most terrible hardships to bring him the letter — and herself; and now that her task was at an end she lay stretched upon his hard plank bed, dreaming as peacefully of the happiness of being once more with the man she loved, as though the bed were of down, and the hut a palace. And outside, within a few yards of her, the Englishman lay face downwards upon the short dry turf, cursing alike his past folly and his present weakness. His letter lay unopened by his side; for the moment he had even forgotten it. Whilst he had been with her he had striven hard to hide his feelings; but now that he was alone in the darkness he looked this thing in the face, and the longer he looked the less he liked it. It seemed only the other day that he had made his escape; that he had willingly, nay, eagerly, turned over that short chapter of his life, and with intense relief had told himself that it was a past dream of folly, over and done with for ever. It was one of fate's grim jests, an everyday affair. But it seemed a little hard upon her.

After a while he sat up, lit a pipe, and tore open the envelope of his letter. The moonlight was just strong enough to enable him to decipher it slowly.

"18, Marlowe Court, Strand, London, W. C.
"*August* 17*th*.

"Dear Sir,

"After considerable trouble and some expense, we have become acquainted with some further details concerning the man, Maurice Huntly, who visited you at Denton on the first of last month. We find that his real name is Marriot, and that seven years ago a warrant was issued for his arrest on a charge of forgery. The warrant was never executed, as he fled the country, but, on his recent visit to England, the police obtained some clue as to his identity, and were on his track. It was to escape from them, and not to avoid completing his disclosures to you, that he quitted England so abruptly. We trust that this will enable you to come across him in the States, as he certainly has no object in keeping out of your way. We believe that he took another name in New York, but that you will doubtless have ascertained for yourself. Our information further goes to show that he was the son of a clergyman, and started life with every advantage. Should anything further transpire we will let you know. In the meantime we remain,

"Your obedient Servants,
"Mason and Williams.

"P. S. — It is never our desire to extract from our clients an unwilling confidence, but at the same time, we cannot refrain from submitting to you that we should be in a far better position to work on your behalf, if we possessed some information as to the nature of the disclosures so important to yourself, referred to by the man Marriot during his brief visit to you at Denton."

He read it through twice, and remained for some time afterwards deep in thought. Then, with an effort to conquer

his restlessness, he lay down, pulled a rug over him, and tried to sleep. Through half-closed eyes he watched the fireflies gleaming in the valley below, and listened to the faint, lulling music from the pine forest away overhead. Gradually he grew drowsy. He was almost dozing, when a sound close at hand disturbed him. The door of the shanty was softly opened, and Myra came out.

She walked noiselessly towards him, with bare feet, and wrapped in the long white garment which he had given her, and which certainly had never seemed destined to fall into such graceful folds around so dainty a form. He caught one glimpse of her dusky face, strangely soft in the waning moonlight, the lips a little parted in a faint smile, and the deep, glowing eyes full of a wonderful liquid fire; and he realized as he had never done before the wild, strange beauty of the girl who was stealing like a ghost to his side. Then he closed his eyes and breathed heavily.

She stooped down till her warm breath fell upon his bronzed, sunburnt cheek. Then, seeing that he made no movement, she gave a wistful little sigh, and kissed him so lightly that her lips seemed scarcely to brush his. Still he did not move, or give any sign of wakefulness. Presently he felt her sink down by his side, and her head drooped upon his shoulder. In a few moments she was asleep. As soon as he was sure of it, he threw the rug over her, and rising softly, walked away in the darkness.

CHAPTER III

A WESTERN LOVE

By six o'clock in the morning a bright sun, mounting into a sky of dazzling clearness, began to make its power felt. An hour later the Englishman, who had been working on his claim since the first gray streaks of dawn, took off his clothes and plunged into a deep pool of the river. Emerging, he dried himself leisurely, dressed, and scrambled up the gorge side to the small platform of green turf on which he had built his cabin.

His guest was at the door in her cowboy's clothes, patched and mended up. She welcomed him with a little cry of delight, and then a swift, deep blush, as she saw his lips part with amusement.

"That's real mean!" she declared. "It's bad enough to have to wear such things, without being laughed at. I shall go and put on my gown!"

He laughed outright, pushing her before him into the cabin, and glancing apprehensively down into the valley, and across to the opposite shanty. There was no one in sight.

"You won't do anything of the sort, if you please," he said decidedly. "You look very well as you are. Come and let's get some breakfast. I'm starving!"

"It's ready and waiting — all that I can find. Bryan,

this is the most elegant place in the world. I never saw anything half so beautiful."

He turned round and stood by her side in the doorway, looking across the valley to where a dim blue haze shrouded the distant mountain-tops. In the pure, fine air all colours seemed intensified — the green of the alder and hazel-trees rising sharp and clear against the sky, and the deeper shade of the broad belt of pine-trees which fringed the mountain's side; a great flowering cactus with bright scarlet blossoms drooped over the precipice below, and the rocks and bushes were starred with flowers of strange and brilliant colours growing out of every crack and in every corner. The dry morning air was sweet, too, with the perfume of many herbs and flowers, and far down in the valley the sun-smitten river gleamed like a bed of silver. The girl, to whom nature in such a guise as this was a revelation, stood there with bright, thoughtful eyes, and with the languid morning breeze stealing through her dark wavy hair, no longer coiled up and concealed. She was feeling the touch of a new power in the world, a new sensation. Hereafter she sometimes associated a new phase of life into which she was to pass, with this morning.

"I like this!" she said softly. "It's better than the city. I'd like to live here always!"

The Englishman frowned.

"You'd be tired of it in a week, Myra. No shops, no theatre, no drives in the park! I doubt whether you'd stand it for a week. Come along, and let's see what you've made of breakfast."

The girl turned away with a sigh, and followed him into the shanty.

"I've found some tea," she said, "and some bacon — I cooked that. The stove don't go very well; guess it wants cleaning."

"That's all right. Things look real tidy for once. Sit down and let us have some breakfast. Afterwards I want to talk to you."

She obeyed him in silence. Her cheeks had suddenly grown pale again. She ate but little, watching her companion most of the time. What was he going to do with her? Would he send her back after all — away from him, and back to the life she hated with a great soul-shuddering hate? Oh, he would not be so cruel as that; surely he would not! Go back to that great hideous city with its garishness and glitter, its cheap vice and all its brazen show of falseness and iniquity! She had drifted there on the broad bosom of an unkind fate; a fate which should surely have marked her out for better things. Vice had no allurements for her. The pleasures of the demi-monde, the cheap theatre and the tawdry dancing saloon, were flavourless to her. She thought of them now as she gazed out at the glorious blue sky, and the panorama of bold and magnificent scenery, with a shudder which came from her very soul. The sweet scented breeze which swept in through the open doorway, tasted to her jaded senses like the elixir of life. A passionate disgust of cities and all their ways leaped up within her. From that moment the life of the past had become impossible to her. She had been born one of nature's children outside the ken of cities, almost of civilization, and it was but the return to an old allegiance.

The Englishman had finished his breakfast, calmly unconscious of all that was passing through the mind of his companion. He lit a pipe, dragged the form into the sunshine, and motioned her to sit at the other end of it.

"Myra," he said gently, after a few moments' meditative silence, "you've done me a real good turn. You've shown uncommon grit, and you've accomplished a thing which a good many men wouldn't have cared about. I haven't said

much about it; I was so surprised to see you last night that you might have thought I wasn't grateful. But I am. I want to show it, if I can. I want to repay you so far as a man is able to repay a service of that sort; and so ——"

"I want no repayment — only to stop right here," she interrupted breathlessly. "I should be perfectly happy. I could look after things and cook for you, and keep the place clean, and — oh, Bryan, for God's sake, let me stop! You were fond of me once — anyway, you used to tell me so. Don't drive me away! I don't care how you treat me. I will be your slave if you like — nothing more. Only don't send me back! Let me stay, Bryan! Do let me stay!"

She had slipped from the form on to the ground, and was kneeling at his feet, her eyes bright with tears, and the colour coming and going in her cheeks. She even ventured to lay her arms imploringly on his shoulders, and turn them round his neck. The Englishman gently unwound her fingers, retaining possession of one of her hands. He looked down into her flushed face with a troubled shade in his own.

"Myra, it wouldn't do," he said kindly. "You'll think me a brute, of course. Dare say I am. But I want you to leave here with the expressman, the day after to-morrow, and go right back to San Francisco. I can't keep you here, little woman, if I wanted to; and if I could, I wouldn't, so there!"

Her bosom heaved. She drew herself right away from him, and stood leaning against the wall, with a crimson colour in her cheeks and her eyes afire.

"You — you don't care for me any more, then? It was true, what I feared! You came here to get rid of me. You were tired, you wanted to escape."

"Steady, Myra. You know that's not right. I came here for two reasons. First, to make money. Secondly, because I was satisfied that the man whom I had come from

England to find, was not in San Francisco. I had no trace of him, nothing to go by. I thought to myself that if he was the restless sort of chap every one made him out to be, he would most likely be off on the gold fever, like the rest of them. That's why I came, Myra. It's all very well for me here. I'm a rough sort of chap, and I can find my level anywhere, but it's not the place for a woman."

"Any place is good enough for such as I!" she cried passionately. "It's only an excuse; you want to get rid of me. You do! And I have come all this way just to see you, just to bring you that letter. Just to be with you! Oh, I hate myself! I hate you! I wish I were dead!"

Her eyes strayed to the revolver which lay upon the table. She made a quick movement towards it, but he caught her wrist and held it firmly.

"That'll do, Myra," he said firmly. "Just listen to me. If I am brutal it is your own fault — so here goes. You came to me of your own free will — ay, of your own accord. Is it not so? I met you in José's café at San Francisco, whilst I was idling about waiting for — you know what. Well, you came and kept house with me for a month or two. I was not the first. You told me so yourself. The thing was common enough. I never made you any promises. I never gave you to understand that it would be likely to last. When I heard that the man for whom I was lying in wait had left the city, I gave you notice that I was off. Well, you were sorry, and I was sorry. I shared up all that I had in the world, and I left you. I may have made you some sort of promise about coming back again, but never as a permanency, you understand. I'm as fond of you now as I ever was — fonder, if anything, after what you've done for me — but you must take this little affair with me as you took the others — see? Now I've made you feel badly. I'm sorry, but I'd got to do it."

The changing shades in the girl's countenance had been a study for which many an eastern painter would willingly have bartered every model in his studio. At first her dusky face had darkened, and her eyes had blazed with all the wild free fury of a woman whose vanity, or love, or both, are deeply wounded. But as he went on, as the whole bitter meaning of his words, winged with a kindness which seemed to her like the poison on the arrow's tip, sank into her understanding, the anger seemed to die away. When he had finished she was crouched upon the ground with her back to him. She did not answer him or address him in any way; only he knew that she was sobbing her heart out, and, being by no means a stone, he began to relent.

"Myra," he said kindly, stretching out his hand and laying it upon her shoulder, "come and sit with me for a minute or two before I go! I must be off to work again directly, and I can't leave you like this."

She got up meekly, dried her eyes, and sat at the extreme end of the form, with her hands folded in her lap, and gazing listlessly out of the open doorway. Alas! the music of the winds and the deep, soft colouring of the hills and far-off mountains were nothing to her now! All the buoyancy of life seemed crushed and nerveless. Even that sudden strong, sweet joy in these glories of nature which had leaped up in her breast, a new-born and joyous thing, was dead. Watching her as she sat there, the Englishman felt like a guilty man. He had made some clumsy attempt at doing the thing which seemed to his limited vision right and kind. He was not accustomed to women or their ways, but he felt instinctively that he had made a mistake somehow. A sense almost of awe came upon him. He felt like a man who has destroyed something immeasurably greater than himself; something so grand that no power in this world could build it up again. He was penitent and remorseful,

even sorrowful, without any very clear idea as to what this evil thing was that he had done. Only he looked into this girl's downcast face, and he felt like some wanton schoolboy who has dashed to the ground one of those dainty, brilliant butterflies with peach-coloured wings, and a bloom so beautiful that a single touch from coarse fingers must mar it for ever. A moment before it was one of God's own creatures, a dream of soft elegance and refined colouring. Now it lies upon the ground bruised and shapeless, fluttering its broken wings for the last time, and breathing out its sad little life. In a minute or two some passer-by will kick it into the dust. That will be the end of it. The Englishman looked at the girl by his side, and his eyes twitched convulsively. There was an odd lump in his throat.

"Myra, I don't want to be a brute!" he said softly. "I want to act squarely to you. That's what makes me seem unkind, perhaps. I'm quite unsettled here! I've heard nothing of the man I'm in search of, but directly I have found him, I shall be leaving the country for good. It wouldn't be fair to take up with you again, would it? You're not like the others. I wouldn't mind if you were!"

She shuddered and looked up at him, dry-eyed and callous. "You are quite right! I do not want to be a burden upon any one!" she said slowly. "I am ready to do just what you think best. If you like, I'll go back the same way I came. I dare say I could find it all right. If not, it wouldn't much matter!"

The dull despair of her tone, and the mute abandonment of herself to his wishes, moved him strangely. For the first time he hesitated. He had been prepared for reproaches, he had steeled his heart even against her tears, her caressings, her beseechings; but this was something quite different. From feeling altogether in the right, he began to wonder vaguely whether he was not attempting something

singularly brutal and unmanly. He hesitated, and every moment the words which he desired to say became more impossible. He turned to her abruptly.

"Aren't you just a little rough on me, Myra?" he said softly. "Don't you see that it is for your sake I wanted to go!"

She looked at him, and his eyes fell before hers.

"For my sake!" she repeated bitterly.

He began to feel absolutely conscience-stricken. After all, the reproach in her tone was just. It was as much for his own sake as hers that he had wanted to be rid of her. There was an element of Puritanism in the man which rebelled against all the irregularities of this wild western life. He liked to be his own man and live his own life! Well, he should have been consistent! Here was a harvest of his own sowing. If his heart had not been moved by the wild, beseeching pathos of this girl's dark eyes shining at him through a cloud of thick tobacco smoke in José's saloon, he would never have found himself in such a quandary. Bah! it was useless to waste time on empty regrets, to rail at the past while the girl's heart was breaking. He got up, and bent over her.

"Look here, Myra," he said kindly. "I guess I'm not so sure about being right after all. I'll think it over whilst I'm at work. See? Don't fret! We'll see if we can't fix up something."

"Very well."

He relit his pipe, and kissed her hesitatingly upon the forehead, a salute which she accepted with perfect impassiveness. Then he strode out of the cottage, and down the gorge to the river-bed.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAUGH OF MR. JAMES HAMILTON

THREE men, the last to leave their claims after the day's work, climbed up the gorge in the heavy twilight. The Englishman and his partner were a little in front, Mr. James Hamilton brought up the rear.

At the parting of the ways they were separating, as usual, without a word, when the Englishman looked back over his shoulder.

"No cards to-night, you chaps — not at my shanty, anyhow!" he said briefly. "Do you hear, Jim?"

"Yes, I hear!" Mr. Hamilton repeated surlily. "You want me to sit and get the miserables in this cussed hole! I'll see myself d——d first. If you chaps ain't playing I'm off to Dan Cooper's saloon. Who the hell's that dodging about your hut?" he added, peering upwards through the brambles. "Here goes for them, at any rate! I'd shoot anything to-day, from a dog to a Christian!"

He raised his gun to his shoulder with a savage scowl. The Englishman stooped down quickly and knocked the barrel into the air, where it exploded harmlessly.

"I'll do my own shooting, thank you, Jim!" he said carelessly. "I've got a stranger up there, a boy who's found his way from San Francisco. You can go to Cooper's store if you like, and be fleeced, and catch a fever, and get

drunk on poison at a dollar a glass! It's no business of mine, but if you take my advice, you'll stop where you are and go to bed early for once! There's enough blackguardism going on down there, without your being mixed up in it."

Mr. Hamilton turned his back on them with an oath, and disappeared. The Englishman and his partner scrambled up the opposite side of the gorge, to the platform where they had built their shanties about a hundred yards apart. Arrived at the top, Pete Morrison thoughtfully hitched up his trousers, and spitting out a tobacco plug, laid his hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Mate!" he said deliberately. "I seed that stranger."

The Englishman turned quickly round.

"Well, what if you did?"

"Not much! It ain't a female, is it?"

The Englishman was beginning to lose his temper. He answered testily, even angrily.

"What the devil does it matter to you or to any one else, who my visitor is! I suppose I may have whom I like in my own shanty."

Pete was quite unmoved, although his face had grown a shade more serious. He took off his cap, and began flicking away a few stray mosquitoes.

"No offence, pard. But ain't you heard what Dan Cooper and his lot have give out?"

"No."

"Well, they allow they're going to run these diggin's on a new tack. Dan was at the Black Creek lot, and I guess you know what a hell that place was turned into. Well, they allow that the first woman who shows here, out she goes and him as brought her, claim or no claim. That's what they say down yonder," he added, jerking his thumb downwards in the direction of the camp. "That's what

Dan Cooper and his chaps do say, and I reckon they're strong enough to run this section."

"That's so!" the Englishman answered, frowning. "Thanks, Pete! I'll take care! Better be mum about my visitor, anyway."

He walked away up the little green path, and pushed open the door of the hut. He scarcely knew the place. It had been cleaned and swept, and his evening meal was prepared. Myra was sitting in a corner, mending some old garment of his.

He greeted her kindly, but without going over to her side.

"Well, Myra! been lonesome, eh?" he asked.

She flashed a single look up at him from her brilliant eyes, and bent again over her task.

"Sorter lonesome," she assented. "I've been busy fixing up things too!"

"Looks like it," he answered, glancing around. "Let's have supper! We've had a nailing hard day's work!"

She got up without a word, and seating herself opposite to him, poured out the tea from a tin pot. He ate and drank with characteristic appetite, and she made a show of following his example. When he had finished, she cleared away, and then came and sat down by his side.

"Have you fixed up when I am to go?" she asked quietly.

She turned a pale, anxious face towards him, and sat patiently waiting for his answer. It was long in coming. He had begun dimly to see what the end of it must be; but even at that last moment he felt a curious reluctance to re-entering into the bondage of her love for him. He leaned back on the bench, and looked at her, wondering at the peculiar inappropriateness of her rude and ill-shaped clothes with that strange, delicate beauty which was so essentially

dainty and feminine. His heart beat a little faster as he looked into her soft dark eyes with their silky eyelashes, and noted, with some return of his old admiration of her, the quivering sensitive mouth, the great coils of waving glossy hair, and the perfectly graceful curve of her throat and neck, gleaming as white as marble in contrast with the low black shirt she wore. The power of her beauty had always been great over him, and he was beginning to feel a sudden and altogether undesired revival of the curious fascination which once before she had possessed for him.

"I have been inquiring about the expressman," he answered. "Seems I was out in my reckoning. They say he's not due for three weeks or so."

She lifted her eyes, and watched him covertly. He had not seemed in any way disappointed or disturbed at the prospect which was before them. Perhaps, after all, he was not so very sorry. He was only human, and the fierce solitude of the long nights, with their almost brutal relaxations of cards and raw spirits, had filled him with a great intolerable weariness. In the day-time when work was possible, the life was, at any rate, bearable. But the darkness came early, and the evenings were long. He had no books, nor any inclination to read them. The man's nature was too large for him to keep himself aloof from those others, his fellow-workers, and besides, he had not the capacity for solitude. He was one with his fellows; a man with all the instincts of a common and gregarious humanity.

Through the long day and in the intervals of his toil, he had been thinking of these things. What had been gall and weariness in the city presented itself here, and under these conditions, in altogether a different aspect. He might truthfully say, if ever his conscience should reproach him in the years to come, that he had done his best to rid himself of this girl's presence. He had failed! It was fate! She

had drifted to him again, a flotsam on the broad river of humanity, herself controlling the current which bore her into his arms. After all, he was but passive in the matter. Even had he desired it, escape would not be easy, and in his heart he was not at all sure that he did desire it. In San Francisco he had found life with this girl in curious antipathy to all his crude notions of what was seemly and honest. A strong and never conquered dislike to their mode of living chafed him from the first. He had not a particle of religion, nor any conscious love of morality. He went into his bondage perfectly untrammelled by any scruples other than instinctive ones. But in a week he was conscious of but one desire: to free himself from a connection which was utterly distasteful to him as speedily as possible; and it was in a measure the reaction from the enervating period of his brief *liaison* which had led him to throw in his lot with a handful of men bound for the gold region. In the shadow of the great mountains, face to face with Nature in all her primitive grandeur, he had become himself again. The hard physical toil had been a luxury to him. He had already learned to think kindly, almost with regret, of the girl who had so suddenly returned into his life. What a difference her presence seemed to make in the miserable little shanty! He was forced to admit it. His day's reflections had all been favourable to her. Even had he desired it, escape now would not be easy.

Perhaps she guessed by his face and his tone, that he was relenting in his demeanour towards her. Womanlike, she took advantage of the opportunity. She glided across the room, and fell upon her knees before him.

"Don't send me away, Bryan!" she begged. "Don't! Don't!"

She was sobbing hysterically at his feet, crouching there, her hair and dress disordered, with all the sinuous grace and

elegance of some beautiful wild animal. Then he took her hand, and hesitated for the last time. Slowly he stooped down, and wound his arms around her, raising her towards him. With a little soft cry she twined her fingers around his neck, and buried her face upon his shoulder. Then he drew her lips to his and kissed her.

They were silent for a few moments, gazing out into the rich, soft darkness, which spread itself like a mantle below them. Down in the camp they could hear the mingled sounds of revelry at Cooper's store, and the steady hammering of some new arrivals marking out their claim and setting up tents. It was early for the moon, and the fireflies like flashes of gold darted up and down the sides of the steep ravine, and hung like tiny stars over the valley below. Suddenly from the other side of the cleft a red flame leaped up hissing into the night. Myra started and looked breathlessly out into the darkness.

"It's only Jim Hamilton — the chap who has the shanty opposite," the Englishman explained. "He's on the borders of a wood, you see, and he's afraid of bears. He burns pine boughs there, every night he's alone!"

Another tongue of flame leaped up, and now they could hear the crackling of the burning branches. Another and another followed. Myra leaned forward, holding her breath, and fascinated for a moment by the curious sight. Even the man whose arm was round her supple waist was interested. The whole air was full of that fitful yet brilliant light casting a vivid glow upon the undergrowth and down into the precipice hung with tiny fir-trees, and throwing back strange lurid shadows upon the red-trunked trees and the dense blackness of the wood. Mr. James Hamilton himself, who was alternately feeding and raking the fire he had kindled, bathed in the rich scarlet glow became almost a picturesque object. Suddenly, as though conscious

of being observed, he stood upright and turned towards them, leaning on his shovel, and slightly shading his eyes with his hand.

A great tongue of red fire scattered a thousand sparks, and leaped up into the black night. For a moment every line and furrow in the man's evil face stood revealed. The disclosure was startling, almost sinister. Even the Englishman, who had sat opposite to the man for months, shuddered and turned away. For a few seconds he forgot his companion. Then a stifled cry from his side, and an added weight upon his arms, reminded him of her with alarm. He caught her up in his arms and bore her to the bed. Her face was white and her eyes were closed. She had fainted.

And across the gorge, bathed in a stream of red fire, Mr. James Hamilton stood there like a carved figure, with a light more brilliant than the flaming pine boughs had ever cast, blazing in his eyes, and a fire more fierce than that which had made white ashes of the dry wood, burning in his evil heart. Then he dropped his hand and burst into a hoarse ringing laugh, a laugh which echoed up the gorge and down the valley, and came even to the ears of the men sitting in Dan Cooper's store. One cursed the jackals, and another spoke of wolves. But the laugh was the laugh of Mr. James Hamilton.

CHAPTER V

A HATEFUL FIGURE FROM A HATEFUL PAST

It was morning. As yet the sun had gained no strength, and though the air above was clear and bright with the promise of a glorious day, a mantle of hazy white mists floated in the valley, and hung over the tree-tops. Mr. James Hamilton, after throwing a careful glance around, slipped out from his cabin, scrambled down the gorge and up the opposite side, and walked softly along the garden path which led to the shanty.

The Englishman had gone to the river — he had watched him go. Only his visitor was there. As he approached within a few yards of the shanty, Myra, who had just risen, came to the door to watch the sun strike the tops of the distant Sierras. Instead, she looked into the dark, evil face of Mr. James Hamilton.

She started back with a little low cry. The colour faded from her cheeks and the glad light from her eyes. A sudden faintness came over her. Sun and sky, wooded gorge and rolling plain, commenced to dance before her eyes. She felt herself growing sick and numbed with horror. Last night she had persuaded herself that it was a delusion. The shadows and the dim light had made her fanciful. But here in the clear morning's sunshine, where every object possessed even an added vividness, there could be no pos-

sibility of any mistake. The man whom it had been the one fervent prayer of her life that she might never see again, was face to face with her alone in these mountain solitudes.

And he had not changed — not a whit. There was the same cold, ugly smile, the same fiendish appreciation of the loathing which he aroused in her. He took off his battered cap, and made her a mock obeisance.

"You — here!" she gasped. She felt that she must say something. The silence was intolerable. It was beginning to stifle her.

"You've hit it!" he remarked. "Did you think I was a ghost? Feel! I'm flesh and blood! Come and feel, I say!"

He held out his arms with a gesture of coarse invitation. She shrank away with a little cry which dropped into a moan — almost of physical pain.

"Don't touch me! Don't dare to touch me! What do you want?"

Mr. Hamilton appeared hurt. His manner and his tone implied that he had expected a different reception.

"What do I want? Come, I like that! You don't mean to tell me that you've come to this God-forsaken hole of a place after some one else, eh? When I saw you last night, I thought at first of coming right over and claiming you. It's me you came for, I reckon. Ain't it, eh?"

Her eyes flashed fire upon him.

"Come after you!" she repeated, her bosom heaving with pent-up emotion. "Oh, my God! I would sooner walk into my grave. To look at you — and remember, is torture! What do you come here for? How dare you come into my sight!"

He laughed; a low, sneering laugh that had little of merriment in it.

"So it is the Englishman, is it? Now listen here, my sweetheart, and don't ruffle your pretty feathers. If we

were in San Francisco, or any place where there was a choice of society, you could take up with whom you liked and be d——d to you; but out here it's different! You're mine, and I mean to have you! Do you hear? This blasted hole has given me the blues. I'm lonely, d——d lonely, and 'pon my word, you're a devilish handsome woman, you know! It won't be for long. I shall soon be as tired of you as I was before, and then you can come back to your Englishman! No nonsense, you little fool! You belong to me, body and soul, and I'm going to have you!"

She had not been able to attempt any escape, had any been possible. The man's very presence seemed to have bereft her of all strength. She stood there fascinated with the deep unspeakable horror of it, trembling from head to foot, and miserably conscious of her own impotence. Before she could recover herself his arms closed suddenly around her, and his hot breath scorched her cheek as he stooped down and lifted her bodily into his arms. She gave one despairing shriek, and then a cry of joy. There was a slow, deliberate footstep outside, and a tall form stood upon the threshold. Mr. Hamilton dropped his burden, and turned round with a fierce oath.

It was Pete Morrison who was lounging there, lank and nonchalant, with a pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets.

"Hello! What's the shindy!" he inquired good-naturedly.

"It's no affair of yours," answered Mr. Hamilton, with savage emphasis. "Stand aside and let us pass, Pete Morrison. I'm not the man to be trifled with, and I'll stand to my word to-day. Out of my path, or I'll let daylight into you, sure as hell!"

Pete Morrison stood a little on one side, and blew a volume of tobacco smoke from his mouth.

"Where's the hurry?" he inquired. "I ain't standing in your way. You may go as fast as you like, but I kinder think you'd better leave the boy," he added mildly.

"The boy's mine. Clear the way, I tell you!"

His hand stole down towards his belt. Quick as lightning Pete Morrison's hand flashed out towards him.

"Hands up, Jim."

Mr. Hamilton obeyed the order, and saved his life. He still looked into the dark barrel of Pete's revolver, but the pressure on the trigger was relaxed.

"Now look here, Jim," Pete Morrison remarked calmly. "I'll allow that this ain't none of my affairs. I interfere only as far as this. While my pard's away, no one don't enter his shanty, nor meddle with his property — not if I'm around, anyway. If this 'ere boy belongs to you, come and fetch him while Bryan's here. That's all. Now I reckon you'd better quit. You seem to have scared the life out of the young 'un."

Mr. Hamilton was white with rage. He walked sullenly to the door and then turned round.

"Very well, Pete. Your turn now, mine next. I'm off to the creek. What was it Dan Cooper proposed, and Pete Robinson seconded, eh?" he sneered. "No women in this 'ere camp. And you and your d——d partner thought you'd make fools of us all by calling that a boy, eh? Ha! ha! ha! We'll see. Mark my words, Pete, my fine chap. Before to-morrow's sun goes down, you'll be advertising for a partner. Ha! ha!"

He turned away. Suddenly a faint voice recalled him. He looked round. Myra was standing in the doorway, pale and trembling. She laid her hand on Pete Morrison's coat-sleeve.

"Is that true?" she whispered hoarsely. "Tell me quick."

"Reckon so," Pete answered gruffly.

He had done his duty to his partner, but he had no friendly feelings towards this stranger. She turned towards Mr. Hamilton, who was watching her with an evil smile.

"Will you wait a little time before you go down and tell them in the camp?" she said, in a dull, lifeless tone.

"Four-and-twenty hours," he answered briefly. "If you are with me to-morrow morning before the sun touches yonder ridge, I am silent. If not — you know."

He sprang down the gorge side and disappeared. Pete Morrison had also gone back to his shanty without another word to the stranger whose presence he found so unwelcome. Myra was alone.

She sat down upon the little bench and looked out with blind, unseeing eyes on the sun-smitten woods and the valley still overhung with faint wreaths of fairy-like mist. Alas, all their sweetness was gone for her. A great black shadow lay across it all. Shuddering, she dared for a moment to glance back at those awful days which for years she had been striving to forget; days of horror, and degradation, and sin, days almost of madness. She had climbed a little way out of hell, only to be thrust back again by the same hand that had dragged her down. She knew no God. She had no friend. There was no way for her to turn, nothing but death. She stretched out her hand, and thrust the small revolver which she had brought with her from San Francisco into the bosom of her gown. She had been very near it twice before: once when her first trust had been betrayed, and again in the desert when gaunt famine had stared her in the face. This time it seemed to her that death would be an easier thing. The man who had shown her the blackest and most hideous depths of human depravity was breathing the same air. Better death by the slowest and most awful tortures than that his hand and hers should

ever meet again upon this earth. Better a hell of everlasting torture than such a hell as this. She stretched out her hand with a convulsive, dramatic gesture towards the little brown shanty on the other side of the gorge, and her lips moved in an unspoken oath. The sweet, sharp air into which she looked was rent by the single word which burst from her tightly-compressed lips: "Never!"

CHAPTER VI

THE DESIRE OF THE WORLD

Soon after eight o'clock, the Englishman, with his spade over his shoulder, and the perspiration streaming from his face, came toiling up the gorge, all unconscious of the fact that he was being watched by three people. Mr. Hamilton, duly prepared for any little unpleasantness that might take place, was skulking in the dark interior of his shanty, with a long knife in his belt, and his revolver on the table before him. He had no intention of going down to work until he saw what was to be the result of his morning's expedition. In public he felt that any contest between the Englishman and himself would have to be conducted according to the camp's notions of fair play. Here, on the contrary, he would have full advantage of certain methods known only to himself and in which by frequent practice he had attained a singular proficiency. So he sat smoking his pipe, and watching the tall, stalwart figure climbing up the valley, with a grim smile on his dark face.

There were two others who watched his progress. Pete Morrison, who stood at the door of his cabin, equipped for the day's toil, and ready to start off and take his place; and Myra, who was of the three certainly the most anxious. Directly she saw Pete Morrison step out as though to intercept his partner, she hurried forward to the edge of the

gorge, and waved both her hands to hasten him on. If she had felt sure of her footing, she would have scrambled down to meet him. Anything to have reached him first — anything to prevent the knowledge of the morning's adventure reaching him from any one else save herself.

She took one step down the gorge, steadying herself with a low-hanging alder bough. The Englishman saw her, and waved her back.

"Hold on!" he cried, in surprise. "I'm coming!"

"Hurry, then!" she called back. "Breakfast is just spoilt!"

Pete, too, had taken his pipe from his mouth, and seemed about to address his partner, now immediately below him. At the sound of the girl's voice, however, he paused and glanced up to the broad green platform on which she was standing, her hair waving in the breeze, and her slim figure clearly outlined against the blue sky. He was too far away to read her expression, but something in her voice and her quick, anxious glance in his direction struck him curiously. He checked his forward movement, and contented himself with a gruff good-morning, as the Englishman passed on below, and commenced to scramble up the gorge.

"Going down, Pete?" he called out.

"Right away!" was the brief reply.

"Hold on a bit!"

He lounged forward to meet his partner, who was scrambling up towards him. During the interval of his waiting, he glanced up to where the girl was watching the two men, in a manner which he meant to be reassuring.

"She'll tell him right enough," he reflected. "Guess she'll try and smooth it down. Just as lief she would! Hullo, mate, what's up?" he added aloud.

The Englishman's face was all aglow. He had something tightly clenched in his left hand, and after a quick glance

around, he held it out towards his partner, and slowly unclasped his fingers. Even Pete Morrison's set features relaxed for once. A gleam of enthusiasm shone in his hard face. Then he glanced suspiciously over towards Mr. Hamilton's abode.

"Keep it snug!" he said coolly. "I ain't seen Jim go down this morning, and I'd just as lief he didn't know of this, yet. Any more?"

"Heaps! More in my pockets. It's the biggest find yet!"

Pete Morrison looked away for a moment, and his coat-sleeve brushed across his eyes. He had turned towards the Blue Hills, but he saw only a woman's worn, pale face, thin and harassed, yet with a soft, pleasant light in the keen gray eyes. It was gone almost directly.

"I was thinking — of my old woman!" he remarked apologetically. "It seems kinder hard!"

The Englishman made a gesture as though to stretch out his hand. Pete stopped him.

"Thank'ee, mate!" he said hurriedly. "We won't shake. I guess that Jim's watching us from yonder. He's a bad lot, is Jim — a cursed bad lot!"

The other nodded silently, and they separated. Pete shouldered his spade, and after one more doubtful glance at the slim figure watching them so earnestly from the summit, slouched off. Myra watched him with relief. He had not told. A single glance in the Englishman's face was sufficient to assure her of that.

"Hungry, little woman?" he cried out cheerfully, throwing down the spade, and drawing her into the shanty. "Come inside, and hear some news!"

He pulled the door to after them, and drawing her pale face up to his, kissed her once or twice.

"You've brought us luck, after all, you little puss!" he said heartily. "Sit down and give me my break-

fast. I want to be off back at work. Look at that first, though!"

He held out his left hand, and she saw a lump of dull brown metal here and there glittering brightly. She balanced it in her fingers and gave it back to him.

"Is it gold?" she asked, half-fearfully.

"Gold! Ay, to be sure it is," he answered, "and gold such as hasn't been found hereabouts yet. There's more, too, heaps more — piles and piles of it. My God! To think of its coming so suddenly as I was on the point of giving up! It's wonderful!"

He was standing up in the centre of the hut, his eyes gleaming, and his whole face lit up. The fever of the thing was upon him. After so much useless toil, success such as this was intoxicating. His companion's apathy amazed him.

"Don't you understand, Myra?" he exclaimed, passing his arm around her. "We're going to be rich, going to have heaps and heaps of money. This little brown nugget here," he went on, touching it enthusiastically, "means the key to another world. It means diamonds and Paris dresses and a carriage for you, and for me, more than all that! For me ——"

He stopped abruptly. A dark shade had stolen into his face; the light had died away. It was several moments before he spoke again.

"Yes, it means more than all that for me!" he added quietly. "It shall mean it. With this gold to aid me, I shall succeed. Come, Myra, breakfast! I must be off again!"

He ate and drank heartily, but a curious abstraction seemed to have settled down upon him. Every now and then he muttered to himself. Myra watched him with tears in her eyes. He was taking no notice of her whatever.

Her heart was aching to tell him everything; to creep into his arms, and sob out her miserable story. And then a chill stole into her blood and through her veins. If they sent her away she would have to go alone. Now that they had at last found gold, all chance of his leaving with her was gone. Perhaps he would be angry when he heard that she had been discovered, that those rough men who had constituted themselves the moral guardians of the camp were to be appealed to, that she might be driven out. Perhaps — but, no, she would not dream for a moment of anything so horrible as that. He would never dare to suggest her compromising in any way with the man who had discovered her. He had been rough to her sometimes, but he was a man — he would not do that! Oh, if only she could fall at his feet and tell him everything. Her brain was dizzy and tired with horrible imaginings, and her heart was sick with fears and memories. She looked into his face with despairing longing; if only he would look at her he must see the trouble she was in. But it was hopeless. He was almost unconscious of her presence. His sudden good fortune seemed to have awakened a train of memories completely and absolutely absorbing. She watched him in mute despair as he rose, lit his pipe, and prepared to go. Yet she must say something before he left her. He must know, at any rate, of the morning's adventure. If she did not tell him, Pete Morrison would.

"Bryan!" she began hesitatingly. He turned sharply around. He had been about to leave the place without even bidding her good-bye.

"What is it, Myra?"

"I wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. Are you in a great hurry?"

"Of course I am," he answered impatiently. "Whatever it is, to-night must do! I can't stop now."

She tried to speak again, but the words died away upon her lips. Before she could recover herself, he was gone. She listened to his long, swinging steps as he strode away and disappeared over the gorge side. Even then she could scarcely believe it. She stood just as he had left her, white to the lips, and nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers. Gone with never a word or a glance to comfort her! For the whole day she must remain alone, alone with this hideous ghostly stock of memories to bear her company, and this precipice, deep and black, still yawning at her feet. It was too much.

The sun was high in the heavens when she opened her eyes. She had fallen across the floor face downwards, and the blood from a slight cut in the temple had dried upon her face. She staggered to her feet, and looked half-fearfully around. She was alone. There were no signs of any one having been in. Presently, she fetched a pail of water and bathed her face, arranged her disordered hair, and sat down at the door.

Below in the valley there was a little hum of excitement. The news of a great find had spread like wildfire, and every one was working with feverish energy. She could see the dark figures all crowded together near the lucky claim, and now and then she could hear some hoarse murmurings of many voices. A new thought worked itself into her dull brain. Perhaps, in this great wave of excitement, they would let her alone, and he would not be able to carry out his threat. She had done nobody any harm; perhaps they would not turn her out after all. Gradually, she worked herself into a state, if not of cheerfulness, at least of some hope. She got up and tidied the place, made herself a cup of tea, and some faint vestige of her natural light-heartedness reasserting itself, she began even to sing. She had not

much fear of another visit from Mr. Hamilton, for she knew him well enough to guess what the effect of the gold find would be upon him. He would work for awhile, at any rate. She could picture him to herself, half-naked, and covered with dirt and sweat, digging with feverish energy, and cursing through his white teeth at every empty spadeful he flung up. Until night, at least, she would be safe from him.

The afternoon stole on, and as the heat seemed to grow fiercer rather than to decrease, she flung herself down upon the bed, and closed her eyes. How long she slept she could scarcely tell, but she suddenly woke up with a start. She found herself trembling in every limb. All the old terror was back again. She knew that it was no idle start which found herself trembling in every limb. All the old terror had awakened her so suddenly. She was not alone. Across the floor on which her startled eyes were riveted, was the long, dark shadow of a man.

CHAPTER VII

A YOUNG MAN FROM THE EAST

"I BEG your pardon, young lady. I am sorry to intrude, but as this is the first sign of a habitation I've seen for several days, I took the liberty of looking in. I'm sorry to have disturbed your siesta."

The voice was a strange one. The new-comer was certainly not the man of whose intrusion she was in such abject dread, nor was, apparently, any one from the camp below. She rose to her feet and faced him.

"Won't you come in and sit down?" she said.

He staggered rather than walked to the bench, and sank down with a little exclamation of relief. He was evidently completely exhausted. She poured out some brandy into a cup and gave it to him. He almost snatched it from her fingers, and drained it to the last drop. Then he sat up, and a little colour began to creep into his cheeks. Myra looked at him curiously.

"Had a rough time?" she inquired. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head and pointed down into the valley.

"I have a donkey — I mean a mule — down there," he explained. "Plenty of provisions, but nothing to drink. I've come all the way from San Francisco," he continued. "What a journey! No roads, and not a single inn!"

She laughed gaily.

" Why, you didn't expect hotels all along the track, did you? " she exclaimed. " Seems to me that you're not used to this sort of country. Where are you from? "

He leaned forward, his hands upon his knees, an odd little figure with sallow, cunning face, and little bright eyes set a good deal too close together. Myra was not in the least afraid of him. She could have lifted him up and thrown him out of the shanty with the utmost ease.

" My dear young lady," he said deliberately, " you have exactly hit it. I am not used to this sort of country, and I don't mind telling you that I never should get used to it. I don't like it, and I don't like the people. Now I appeal to you," he continued, waving his hand, and leaning back on the bench with his legs crossed, " I appeal to you, young lady, as an impartial and unprejudiced witness. I come over to San Francisco from — never mind from where, but I come over to get gold. I am a perfect stranger to the country, the people, and their customs. Gold seeking being my mission, as it were, I desired naturally to associate with —er— people of that profession, or, at any rate, people who knew something about it. For that purpose I frequented a restaurant entitled the ' Café José,' at the back of Seventh Avenue. Perhaps you know the place? "

A slight shudder passed through the girl's whole body. She looked at the stranger with suddenly reawakened suspicion. What did he mean by coming here and talking to her of the " Café José? " He returned her gaze, however, with as much openness as could be expected from a man with such a physiognomy. The fierce, searching light of the girl's black eyes seemed to surprise him a little. That was all.

" I have heard of it," she said shortly, seeing that he waited for some response from her.

" Just so. Well, at that place I met a man who professed

to understand the whole rigmarole of gold-digging. We talked of it every night for a week. He was going to start himself almost directly, it seemed. He was just waiting for some money to come in for stores, and all that sort of thing. I ain't boring you, am I? "

"Oh, no," she answered, starting at his abrupt question. "Go on."

"Just so. Well, the long and short of it is, that we arranged a partnership. He was to purchase tools, stores, and everything that was necessary, and I was to plank down the brass. See? "

"Perfectly," she answered, smiling. "It's very simple."

"Lord! I was the simple," he groaned. "Ten days ago we left San Francisco on donkeys — I mean mules, and I don't mind telling you, though I never let on to that chap, I'd never been on the back of any animal before in my life, except a Margate donkey for about two minutes. But, I forgot, you don't know what a Margate donkey is, of course. Whew! how I did suffer, and how that chap did laugh! We had an animal apiece, and another one to carry the stores and a tent, and our tools. Well — but I ain't told you about my dream yet, have I? "

"I guess not," she admitted.

"Well, one night, night after I got to San Francisco, I dreamed that I was picking up gold as fast as I could lay my hands on it, lumps and heaps of it, all big and glittering. Well, there warn't anything odd in my dreaming that, with my mind all running on gold-diggings, but I'm blowed if I didn't dream the very name of the place. It was the Blue River valley."

She looked up.

"That's where you are now," she remarked.

"Worse luck! " he answered gloomily. "Well, I told this chap I'd fallen in with, when I heard that there was

such a place, that the Blue River valley was the spot that I'd made up my mind for. He tried all he knew to dissuade me. There's a place called Christopher's Creek he was sweet on, and that was where he wanted to go. However, when he saw that I warn't to be moved, he gave in, and we started for here."

"Where is he now? You said you were alone, didn't you?" she asked.

"In hell, I hope!" he snapped viciously. "Beg pardon. I'm a peaceful man — perhaps because there ain't size enough about me for fighting — but it does make my blood boil when I think of that chap. We'd been six days out when we came to a place where the track forked out into two. All of a sudden he pulls his mule up short, and whips out a revolver. I thought he'd gone mad, but I warn't going to sit still to be shot at, so off I jumped and got behind my donkey. Lord, you should have heard him laugh!

"'Look 'ere, matey,' he says, 'you're about the queerest pard I ever took up with, and I've had about enough of you. You reckon you want to go to the Blue River valley, don't you? Well, there's your trail straight ahead, and if you lose it, why, make for that mountain there, and you're all right. I'm off to Christopher's Creek, and I guess we part here.'

"'What about my stores, and my tools, and my donkey?' I cried out, for he was leading the spare animal, and had got the rope round his wrist. 'If you're going to leave me here, give up my property.'"

"What did he say to that?" asked the girl, biting her lip.

"Say? He didn't say much, but you should have heard him laugh. He stuck his great brawny fists in his sides, and leaned back on his donkey, yelling. Presently he wiped

his eyes, and undoing one of our packages, he tossed me some tins and a pound of biscuits.

" ' Here you are,' he shouted. ' This'll keep the life in your ugly little carcase till you get to Blue River,' and with that he hitched up, kicked his donkey, and rode off, laughing till you'd have thought he'd have burst. What do you think of that for villainy, eh? " he asked, his little eyes twinkling fiercely. " Rode off with my mules, my stores, my everything. Why, even the clothes that were on his back were mine, bought and paid for with my money, and he made me change donkeys with him just before, so that he should leave me with the worst. Damn him! "

Myra looked at him in half contemptuous sympathy. He was surely the strangest little animal who had ever wandered into this great western world, where every man must fight his own battle, and be ready to fight it at any moment and in any place. His sallow, pallid little face, set with dark, ferret-like eyes, was surmounted by a shock of black, unkempt hair. He wore a black tail-coat, travel-stained and devoid of buttons, the trousers and boots of a city clerk, and a linen shirt and crushed dirty collar. He was like a parasite of the town. Certainly he had no place in this great open country, where men needed hearts and muscles of iron, and rejoiced in a stalwart independence. She had lost all her distrust in him — it was merged in contempt. Surely no one would be so mean and debased a thing as to invent such a story as he had told. At his own reckoning he must be accepted as a miserable little coward without mind or muscle. What was to become of him out here?

She put her thoughts into words.

" What are you going to do, now you are here, without tools or anything? " she asked.

" I don't know! " he answered, standing up and stretch-

ing himself. "I've got a little money left — just a little. I may buy a share in a claim. Is that where they work, down there?"

He had strolled to the door, and was looking down into the valley, where the sounds of toil and hoarse voices were growing fainter. She looked over his shoulder with ease, and nodded.

"Yes; all round the bed of the old river," she answered. "They're about through for the day, now. Guess you'd better go down and see after some quarters, unless you're going to camp out!"

"Not for me!" he declared fervently. "I've had about enough of that. If money can buy it, I'll sleep upon a bed to-night!"

"You won't find much in the shape of a bed down yonder," she remarked listlessly. Her interest in this odd little morsel of humanity had vanished. It was getting near the time for the Englishman to return. Very soon her fate would be decided. It was strange to think that her eyes might never see the morning break again. She would surely die rather than give herself into his hands again. She did not hesitate about that for a moment. Then she turned her face towards the great rolling plain. The memory of those awful days and nights rushed in upon her. Better death than to face such again — alone! If she was driven out, it should be to die!

"Well, I'm off!" remarked a sharp voice at her ear. "I say!"

She glanced down quickly. The stranger was still standing by her side.

"Yes?"

"Odd thing it would be, wouldn't it, if I was to drop across a pal in this God-forsaken corner of the earth! Know the names of any of these chaps here?"

She shook her head.

"I suppose they have names!" she remarked. "They don't use them much out here, though. They call one another anything!"

She chanced to look at him as she finished her speech. His bead-like eyes were fixed upon her, all alight with a keen inquisitiveness. He withdrew them at once.

"Well, I should soon find them out, working amongst them," he declared cheerfully. "There are quite a lot of chaps I've knocked up against at different times, who said they were coming out this way. Let me see; there was Churcher — George Churcher, and Bill Dyson, and that fellow Richardson I met on the boat. Ay! and Dick Jenkins and that other chap — what's his name? — Maurice Huntly."

She caught hold of the side of the door, and shuddered. Through the fast gathering gloom, she could see his black glittering eyes fixed steadfastly upon her.

"There is a man here who used to call himself Huntly," she remarked, looking down the valley. "That's his shanty, opposite!"

"Live alone?"

"Yes."

"About thirty years old. Short and stout; very fair and squints. Eh?"

She shook her head.

"No; he's tall and dark, and I don't think there's anything the matter with his eyes."

He scratched his chin, and appeared disappointed.

"Ain't the same," he remarked. "Didn't see how it could be. The man I mean was the least likely to be here of all the lot. He got married last year. Lord, how dark it's getting! Good evening to you, my dear. I shouldn't

be in no hurry, I can tell you, if I knew my way down that confounded hill a bit better. Ta — ta!"

He leered into her face without apparently noticing the gesture of disgust with which she turned away from him. Then he scrambled on to the level, and mounting the mule which was browsing calmly by the wayside, he rode off awkwardly enough down the cañon. Once he tried to turn round to wave his hand, and very nearly lost his seat. The girl took no notice. She was standing there, straight and rigid, waiting for her doom.

CHAPTER VIII

A CORNER OF THE CURTAIN

THE men were late coming from their work that evening. The twilight was merging into darkness, and a few fireflies were commencing to dart about in the valley, when she heard their voices approaching. The Englishman and Pete Morrison stood talking for several moments at the door of the latter's dwelling, but though she strained her ears, she could not catch any part of their conversation. Presently, she heard a brief good-night pass between them, and the Englishman's massive figure came towering through the darkness. She stepped back into the shanty, put the lamp on the table where his supper was carefully spread, and stood waiting for him with beating heart. There was nothing more she could do. She had put on the gown which she had jealously carried with her through all those days of toil and misery, and she had done her rich hair in the manner he liked best. Everything inside the shanty was as neat and tidy and clean as it could be made. She stood there waiting, her eyes soft with unshed tears, and the colour coming and going in her cheeks. She could even hear her heart beating underneath her dress. It seemed to her that her fate would be written in his face.

He flung open the door of the shanty and entered, stooping low. When he drew himself up, she was unable to

decide immediately whether his countenance was favourable or not. He nodded to her kindly, but in an abstracted manner, and — he did not seem to notice her gown. Her lip quivered pitifully.

"You're late, Bryan," she said. "Your supper's all ready."

She came and stood over by his side. He put his arm around her waist and kissed her.

"You're a regular little Englishwoman," he declared, glancing round. "Shouldn't have thought that you'd have been up to roughing it like this. By Jove, Myra, how handsome you are!"

He held her out at arm's length and looked at her. The soft colour glowed in her cheeks, and her eyes flashed with joy.

"Am I?" she whispered. "Guess I like you to think so."

He looked at her steadily, and a cloud passed over his face. He was thinking of the future, nearer than ever it seemed to-night, when the day of their parting must come. What would become of her; what manner of life was there in which she could find happiness, and keep herself from sinking deeper into the slough from the borders of which he had snatched her? That very beauty, which it seemed to him that until then he had never properly appreciated, now all the more glorious for its pitiful surroundings, troubled him. It was too fair a thing to be coupled with a tarnished life.

"Well, let's have supper," he said suddenly. "I had a huge wash in the river, and I've an appetite, I can tell you."

They sat down together. Her relief was too great for her to eat. But suddenly a cold chill ran through her blood. Her heart sank. Supposing Pete had not, after

all, mentioned the morning's adventure? He happened to be looking at her, and he noticed the change in her countenance.

"What's up, Myra?" he inquired, setting down the tin pannikin which he had been in the act of lifting to his lips. "Seen a ghost?"

She looked at him, and suddenly leaned forward. "Has Pete Morrison told you about this morning?" she asked breathlessly.

He frowned and went on with his supper.

"Yes. That beast Jim came up and frightened you, didn't he? We've been too hard at work to talk much, and Pete isn't much of a hand at a yarn. I'd like to hear you tell me just what happened."

She stood up and locked her hands nervously in one another.

"Yes, I want to tell you," she said. "I want to tell you very much. You've never heard how it was that I became — what I am. I should like to tell you."

She was very pale, but a dull red spot was blazing in either cheek. Her bosom was heaving and her breath was coming sharply. The Englishman moved uneasily in his chair. He hated a scene, and the girl's agitation distressed him.

"No! I wouldn't talk about it, Myra," he said. "I know that it wasn't your fault, of course."

She shook her head. "I must tell you a little — not all. I shan't make a long story of it. My father was a timber man on the Mellin River, about a hundred miles from San Francisco. I lived with him, and I hated it. I had no mother, no sisters or brothers. One day he died, and I was alone in the world. I went to try and find an aunt in San Francisco. I was about sixteen then. She was very poor, and very cruel to me; but I shared her roof, and I worked

as a waitress at a restaurant. There was a young man who came there, who offered to marry me. I was utterly miserable, and I agreed at once. I cared nothing for him, and told him so. He did not mind; he wanted me, anyhow. So I married him. In three days I left him. He told me that he had another wife alive, that our marriage was only a sham; and when I declared that I should leave him, that very instant, he tried to beat me.

"I went to my aunt. She turned me away with an oath. Then I took another situation. In a week or two he found me out. He begged me to go back. I refused. He left me money. I threw it at him. He did not break into oaths, as I had expected, but he went away quietly. He sent me money through the post. I would not use it. He came back again, and threw himself at my feet, imploring me to go back and live with him. Again I refused. Soon after, I lost my situation — through him, I discovered afterwards. I was starving. Then he came to me again. He was quiet, and even gentle with me. He begged and begged, until at last in despair, I consented to go back to him. He treated me well for awhile. Then I discovered why.

"He had a friend, or rather a master, who had been pleased to admire me. What the hideous compact was, I do not know, but his only object in getting me back was to hand me over to this man — for a price. I was to be sold like an animal. The man who had deceived me was to pass me on to his master. It was a bargain between them. After weeks of persecution, I came to know of it. I do not try to tell you of the hideousness of those days; I dare not let myself think of them. Only if an eternal hell opened before my feet side by side with a renewal of them, I should choose hell! I — oh, God! I cannot bear to think of them!"

She wrung her hands, and a curious strained look came into her features. Her eyes were full of horror. She swayed

and would have fallen, but the Englishman leaned over and passed his strong arm around her.

"Poor little woman!" he said tenderly.

His tone acted upon her like magic. She fell on her knees, and hid her face upon his chest, sobbing as though her heart would break. Wisely he let her be, and as soon as the storm was over, he lifted her easily on to his knee.

"Look here," he whispered. "What's the good of raking all this up? I don't want to know anything about it. I'd rather not."

She shook her head. "You don't understand!" she said. "I must tell you. I shan't mind so much now. Bryan, those men were like fiends to me. I had made up my mind to die before I gave in. It wasn't that I minded — the actual wickedness so much, but I hated that other man — oh, how I hated him! They treated me sometimes like gaolers, sometimes they brought me diamonds, and sometimes they tried to starve me. One night the other man came in alone. I — I can't go on. I was desperate, and I stabbed him. He wasn't much hurt, but he was frightened, and I got away. I was utterly mad. I had not a friend in the world, and no money. I gave up all hope of leading a good life. I came down to José's Café, and I saw you. You were kinder to me than any one ever had been in my life, and your face was honest. You know the rest of that. We were together for the happiest two months I had ever had. Then you left me, and I thought my heart would break. I was afraid to be alone. That other man was pitiless, and he was strong. I was horribly afraid of him. He was rich enough to have a whole army of ruffians to back him up, and I shivered when I thought of what he might do. Then that letter came for you, and the same day I saw him in his carriage, and a strange man followed me home. I was wild with fright, and you know what I did. I followed you here."

He patted her cheek, and smoothed the hair from her forehead.

"Well, you're safe enough here, little woman," he said with gruff kindliness. "I don't see what you want to look so scared for."

She lifted her face to his. "I haven't told you yet," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "Bryan, that man you call Jim Hamilton is the man who betrayed me. His real name is Maurice Huntly. He is an Englishman."

"By thunder!"

The Englishman's face was a study. The half-vexed sympathy with which he had been regarding the girl upon his knee, had altogether vanished. His face exhibited nothing but the blankest astonishment and wonder.

"You won't give me up to him?" she whispered.

"No, I won't give you up," he promised absently. "Maurice Huntly! My God!"

She looked at him fixedly. A new light was breaking in upon her.

"You know — something about him," she cried breathlessly.

"Not much," he answered, with a short laugh. "Only that he is the man whom I have come five thousand miles to find. Huntly! Maurice Huntly! My God!"

CHAPTER IX

A NEW PARTNERSHIP

The stranger pursued his way with some difficulty down the cañon, and eventually reached the level without accident. Here he paused to take breath and look around. To the right the old bed of the river wound through a fertile valley, and here it was that the bulk of the gold-digging was being done. In the distance a few dark figures with lanterns in their hands were still bending over their work, but the great majority had finished for the day, and in the dim light the great deserted space, with its occasional mounds of fresh-dug earth, and a few rude shafts standing up against the naked sky, had a weird, ghostly appearance. The stranger, whose nerves appeared to be none of the strongest, shivered and led his mule away, following the track to the left. He turned round a steep promotory, and found himself at once in the midst of the settlement.

There were about a score of roughly put together wooden shanties, and one long pine-board building, in front of which several oil lamps were flaring steadily away in the breathless air. Most of the dwellers in the place seemed to be gathered round the latter building, although a few remained leaning against the walls of their shanties smoking alone. A few yards apart, a dozen or two Chinese were squatting on the ground round a large tent, playing cards by the light of several flickering candles.

The arrival of the stranger was the signal for a universal stir. The group around Cooper's store all ceased talking, and turning round, saluted him with various exclamations. The men who had been lounging alone forgot their unsociability in the unwonted excitement, and crowded round him. Even the Chinese threw down their cards, and gazed upon the new-comer open-mouthed.

"Any more of yer, matey?"

"What's the gang?"

"Say, have you brought the mail?"

"Got a newspaper, pard?"

"Hitch him up; there's a nail!"

There was a momentary silence at last. It was felt that the stranger ought to be given a chance to declare himself. He fastened his mule awkwardly up as directed, and stood on the threshold of the store looking round into the rough, toil-hardened faces by which he was surrounded, with some little trepidation. Then he scratched his head feebly and tried to answer their questions. After the deep bass voices which had assailed him, his shrill, quavering tone sounded oddly.

"I'm quite alone," he said. "I had a partner, but he has gone to Christopher's Creek. He went off with all my tools as well as his own. I've been twenty days on the way from San Francisco. I didn't bring a newspaper. I'm going to get something to eat and drink. I'm afraid it won't run to drinks round, but if a bottle of whisky ——"

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, little 'un!"

"That's bully!"

The stranger found his speech brought to an abrupt termination and himself carried off his feet in the sudden rush to get inside the store. He stood in no little danger of being knocked down and trampled on, but Mr. Hamilton, with a

consideration which was highly creditable, caught hold of him by the middle, and lifting him bodily up, deposited him, limp and breathless, in a chair before a long wooden table. Then he joined the rest of the crowd round the bar.

The storekeeper, with the bottle of whisky under his arm, leaned over towards the new-comer.

"Seven dollars, guv'nor," he announced gruffly. "Tip it up, and I open the stuff."

The new-comer produced a slender roll of green-backs, and counted out the money. A dozen hands were extended to pass it over, and a slight gulp of relief passed through the little crowd when it was seen that the money was to be forthcoming. Blue River prices were high, and there had been some apprehension lest the stranger might withdraw from his generous offer.

The bottle was drained to the last dregs. Then one or two of the men brought their liquor over, and sat down at the table. Mr. Hamilton had secured the place next the stranger.

"Dan," he shouted, turning round, "come and take the gentleman's order. Didn't you hear him say that he was hungry? Come and wait on your patrons, you idiot!"

"What's 'e want?" inquired the storekeeper, lounging over the bar. "Can't he give it a name?"

"Whar's the menu? Guess that's what he's waiting for," remarked one of the loungers at the table. "Reckons it's Delmonico's. Fitch the lobster salad, Dan."

Mr. Hamilton brought his fist down on the table with a weighty bang, and glared savagely around.

"Shut up, you blarsted fools! Stranger, there's boiled rabbit and onion sauce. Can you eat boiled rabbit? You can. Good, so can I! Dan, send round two platefuls — platefuls, mind, and don't stump it — of boiled rabbit. We will select the wines later. Mates," he added, looking down

the table with lowering brows, " this gentleman is my friend. You understand! "

He touched his belt. There was no spoken answer, but in a minute or two the table was empty. One by one they got up and lounged outside. The only man amongst them whose face was at all kindly glanced at the stranger as he passed, half in contempt, half compassionately. It was as well for him that he could not hear their remarks when they came together outside. It might have spoilt his appetite.

Mr. Hamilton and the stranger were soon alone in the store. Their supper had arrived and was half finished before either evinced any desire for conversation. Then Mr. Hamilton, still trifling with his fork, leaned back in his chair, and steadfastly watching his companion, asked a question.

" Name, pal? "

The stranger leaned over. " Eh? I beg —— "

" What's your name, I asked? "

" Oh! Christopher Skein. What's yours? "

" Hamilton. Jim Hamilton here, Huntly in 'Frisco. Maurice Huntly, Esq., when I'm in luck. What the hell's the matter with you? "

Mr. Skein was evidently nervous. He had dropped his knife and fork, and had disappeared after them under the table. When he resumed an upright position, there was a tinge of dull brick colour in this cheeks, and his little eyes were brighter than ever.

" I'm all right," he declared briskly — " right as ninepence. Let's have some more liquor! I'll pay! Name it! "

" Brandy! " growled Mr. Hamilton. His companion's suddenly increased hilarity was making him suspicious. It was time to pump him dry.

" Say, what have you come for? " he began, folding his arms upon the table, and leaning heavily forward. " Is it

the gold fever that brought you, or are you on any little lay of your own, eh? Straight, now; no lies! By thunder, I'm not the man to tell lies to. Just you remember that, my weasel!"

An ugly light flashed into his red, bloodshot eyes. He flung a six-chambered revolver down on to the table before him with an unnecessary clatter. The stranger turned pale, and edged his chair away. He was getting horribly frightened.

"Please turn that beastly thing away!" he said peevishly. "It might go off."

Mr. Hamilton stared at him, and then grinned. It was very clear that he had found a greenhorn here.

"Might go off!" he repeated ironically. "Oh, lord! Might go off! Ha, ha, ha!"

He leaned back in his chair, and relapsed into a fit of strident laughter. When it was over, he wiped the tears from his eyes and sat up.

"Go on, young' un!" he said, almost good-humouredly. "Spin us your yarn!"

Whereupon Mr. Skein told his story, with a few embellishments which recent events had suggested to him. For instance, it appeared now that his late partner had stolen both revolvers, and threatened to shoot him dead if he followed him a yard. He liked this story better than the other, and repeated it twice. He had sense enough to know himself that he was a coward, and physically at a miserable disadvantage with the weakest of the men who had thronged the store a few minutes ago. At the same time he fully realized the importance of keeping this fact as far as possible to himself.

Mr. Hamilton listened with some appearance of sympathy. At the close of the narration he produced a pipe, filled and lit it, and spat upon the floor.

"You've been pretty roughly used, and no mistake," he declared. "Why didn't you turn back, though? What's the use of coming here without tools, or money, or anything? What the hell are you going to do?"

"Who said I hadn't any money, eh?" demanded Mr. Skein, running his fingers through his hair. "I'm not stoney broke yet — not quite."

Mr. Hamilton grew more interested.

"Got a bit o' money, eh?" he remarked. "What are you going to do with it? Mark out a claim, and chuck it away in tools, I suppose. I'm d——d if I can see how you're going to handle the shovel, though, when you've got it. Where's your muscle? Lord! what an arm!"

"I would rather," Mr. Skein remarked, with his eyes keenly watching the other's countenance, "I would rather pay for a share in a claim that was already being worked, and take a partner. Having no experience, and being as you say not very strong, I should be content with the smaller share in the profits."

Mr. Hamilton drained a glass of brandy, and held out his hand.

"Put it there, young man," he said impressively. "I'm the only man here who's working alone, and I've got a claim as good as any of them, right next to those lucky devils who've been panning out nuggets all day. I've got a shanty all to myself, and there's heaps of room for you. Blarmed if I didn't take a fancy to you the moment you came in! Plank down the coin, and we're pards."

"What's the figure? I ain't no blooming Vanderbilt, you know; be easy."

Mr. Hamilton meditated.

"I'll take two hundred dollars, and you take a third of the swag, or five hundred, and go yer halves. That's liberal."

On the banks of the Blue River the men toiled hard by day, and slept heavily at night. But high above their heads, in the little wooden shanty at the head of the gorge, that dull, sickly light shone steadily on.

CHAPTER X

A DEBAUCH AND A TRAGEDY

Mr. Hamilton was drunk, fiercely and unmistakably drunk. There could be no doubt about it, although he betrayed none of the usual signs of plebeian intoxication. He was not shouting or singing, or displaying any violent signs of affection for his boon companion and partner. He was not — in a word — maudlin. He sat on a wooden bench with his hands on his knees and his chin thrust forward; whilst opposite to him, as though fascinated by the fierce glare of those red, bloodshot eyes, Mr. Skein was indulging in a very hollow affectation of thoroughly enjoying himself. With his hands in his pockets, and his sallow cheeks flushed by his very moderate share of the empty bottle which lay between them, he was feebly essaying to sing the chorus of a popular comic song:

> "Oh, my, tell 'em to stop!
> Such was the cry of Maria.
> When she cried 'Whoa!'
> They said 'Let her go!'
> And —— "

"Shut up that d——d row, you blithering idiot!"

Mr. Skein closed his jaws with a snap.

"What's the matter with it?" he asked feebly. "I

know I haven't got much of a voice, but that's no reason why you should snarl a fellow's head off."

"Much of a voice! It's like the squeak of a hell-cat," Mr. Hamilton remarked between his teeth. "Turn your rat's face this way. I'm drunk, and you know it. Now, hark 'ee. What the hell do you mean by sitting there and asking me questions about my private affairs, eh?"

"I — I didn't mean any harm," faltered Skein, with chattering teeth. "I've told you all about myself."

"All about yourself! Yes, and it sounded like a blooming pack of lies," growled the other. "Bah! what do I care about you and your pettifogging, crawling little life? Sit up, man, and pull yourself together. Don't crouch there and look at me out of the corners of your eyes, as though I were going to eat you."

"You're such an odd fellow, Jim. You're ——"

"Ay, you'll find I'm odd before you've done with me. Pick up that bottle. Is it empty?"

Skein turned it upside down. Not a drop trickled out. Mr. Hamilton expressed his disappointment with a savage growl.

"Open that cupboard."

Skein obeyed promptly.

"There's a black bottle there, half full, unless you've been guzzling it on the sly. Out with it."

Skein's head and shoulders disappeared in the recess. In a moment he produced the bottle and passed it over. Mr. Hamilton handled it for awhile with affection, passing his hands up and down it with affectionate gentleness. Then he raised it to his lips, and held it there while it gurgled seven times. As he set it down he caught his partner's eye watching him timidly. He held out the bottle to him.

"Drink," he commanded.

Skein took the bottle, raised it to his lips, and set it

down. Mr. Hamilton scowled. He had been listening for the gurgle, and there had been none. Naturally he felt annoyed.

He got up with some difficulty, and seized the bottle with one hand, and the back of his partner's head with the other.

"Now, drink," he shouted thickly. "Drink, you puling idiot! No shamming. Down with it like a man."

With a trembling hand Skein guided the neck of the bottle to his mouth. Instantly it was held there like a vice. The raw, fierce spirit poured down his throat as hot as liquid fire. He coughed, spluttered, yelled. The tears streamed down his cheeks, and he grew purple to the forehead. Then with a mighty laugh Mr. Hamilton withdrew his hand, and, carrying the bottle with him, resumed his seat.

"Hark 'ee, Christopher," he said, frowning till his thick eyebrows met, and his eyes glowed underneath them like pieces of live coal. "You know I'm drunk. You've shirked the bottle yourself on purpose. You've been asking me questions — pumping me, by thunder, just as though I was some commonplace idiot to be turned inside out by a sick-faced insect like you. Perhaps you didn't mean anything. Better for you that you didn't. Perhaps I'm suspicious. Dare say I am. I don't mind telling you this much, you miserable young cub. I'm low down, low down as hell, but I've been a gentleman, and an English gentleman, too, and hunted and shot, and had my town place and country place, and seen more of life than you've ever heard or read of. And I'm not quite done yet. I've got the disposal of a huge estate and a great name in my hand at this very moment. Ha, ha, ha! It's a fine thing! There's a man in the old country who trembles and turns pale at the mention of my name. He's a proud man, too, one of the old sort, but you

go to him and tell him that Jim Hu— Hamilton's outside to have a word with him, and, Lord, how he'd flop!"

Mr. Skein was himself again. His teeth had ceased to chatter, and his bead-like eyes were sparkling. He seemed to have forgotten even his fear.

"Why don't you bleed him?" he whispered.

Mr. Hamilton laughed softly. It was an evil laugh. Even his admiring partner drew a little further away. It was a laugh which suggested a good many things, but certainly not mirth.

"Ay, why don't I?" he said. "Well, I'll tell you, pard. You ain't a bad little sort, and you wouldn't try any games on me, I don't think. I'm a bit hasty with my shooting irons when I'm roused. You remember that, my kid, and if you don't want daylight letting into your body, keep a still tongue in your ugly head. Now I'll tell you. I was in England — not very long ago — never mind how long. There are two of them; one don't know, the other does. I was fixing things up when I got into a row — never mind what sort — it was a hell of a row, though! I had to bolt. Out here a man's life more or less don't count. Lord, it's the sort of place to be jolly in, this is! But I've written to those chaps. I'm going to run 'em up, one against the other. Christopher, my boy, if you were pards with me here," he clapped his hand upon his chest, "your fortune would be made. But you ain't, you see."

Skein was trembling all over, not with fear this time but with excitement. He had distinctly heard the rustle of paper when his partner had struck his chest. It was there, sewn into his coat, very likely. How his heart was beating! Oh, if only he were not such a coward!

"What is it, Jim?" he asked, with quavering voice. "Documents?"

Mr. Hamilton shot a furious glance at his questioner.

There was a look in the lean, craven face and hungry, piercing eyes, which did not take his fancy. He was aware that he had talked too much. The fumes of the spirit had worked like fire in his brain. What had he said? Perhaps it would be safer ——

He drew out his revolver, and began to examine the priming. He spat on the barrel and polished it, glancing every now and then at his companion, who was almost falling off his seat with terror.

There was an intense silence between the two men, so deep that the faint night sounds from the wood, and the music of the softly flowing river in the valley below, floated in through the open doorway to their ears. Suddenly they both gave a great start. Skein sprang up with a cry of fear. His partner, leaning over, seized him fiercely by the arm.

"Listen, you d——d fool!" he muttered savagely. "If you breathe a word I'll knock your brains out!"

They listened motionless. A slight rustling sound again broke the deep night hush. What was it? A sudden breeze in the tree-tops, a stray wolf attracted by the light, or the faint rustling of a woman's gown over the short grass?

"Some one has been lying there listening!" Mr. Hamilton hissed. "Quick!"

He staggered towards the door, the revolver in his hand. Half-way there, he reeled against the wall. The shanty was spinning round. He was blind drunk. He held out the revolver to Skein.

"Take it quick!" he muttered. "Outside! Blaze away!"

Skein snatched it from him, and rushed to the doorway. But he did not even glance out. He turned round and faced his partner. His cheeks were ghastly pale, and his eyes seemed starting from his head.

"Not inside, you blarsted idiot!" yelled Mr. Hamilton. "What the hell are you doing? D——n!"

Two shots rang out, one after the other. Mr. Hamilton, with a fearful oath upon his lips, fell sideways across the floor, with his hand pressed to his side. His partner, throwing down the revolver, leaped through the thick smoke, and knelt over the fallen body. His tongue was protruding between his teeth, and his eyes seemed starting from his head. With shaking fingers he commenced to undo the wounded man's coat. Before he got to the last button Mr. Hamilton opened his eyes, and he drew back with a shriek.

"You've — done for me — you devil!" muttered Mr. Hamilton. "Oh, if I could feel my hands around — around your neck!"

"Give me the — paper in your coat, and I'll leave you alone!" Skein whispered. He was breathing hard, and his lips and eyeballs were burning. It was not quite so easy to kill a man, after all! Mr. Hamilton thrust his hand into his breast, and his partner bent eagerly down. It was a rashness of which he had reason to repent, for, instead of the paper, he received Mr. Hamilton's fist full in his face. He staggered against the wall, sick and dizzy. Then the wounded man raised himself with a little moaning cry.

"Myra!" he gasped. "Myra! he's shot me! Hold him!"

Skein turned round, quaking. Standing upon the threshold, with the moonlight falling upon her white, horrified face, and her slender figure clearly outlined against the deep blue sky, was the girl from the shanty opposite. He did not hesitate for a moment. He leaped past her like a cat, and went headlong down the gorge. She did not try to stop him. Her limbs were paralyzed with horror.

"Myra!" he faltered. "I'm done! Will you come here?"

She did not hesitate then for a moment. She fell on her knees by his side, and took his hand. She forgot her loathing, and she forgot her wrongs. She forgot everything except that she was a woman!

CHAPTER XI

THE GOLDEN EGG

The blackness of night was followed by the dim, spectral gray of an early dawn. Myra, whose face was turned to the open door, welcomed it with a deep-drawn sigh of relief. Another such a night as this, and she felt that death or madness would be welcome. For when Mr. James Hamilton had opened his eyes to find her bending over him, he had stretched out his hand and imprisoned hers. Minutes had grown into hours, and she had not been able to move. He had kept her there crouched by his side, half-stupefied with horror, unable to move hand or limb. He had not spoken to her again; he had scarcely moved except every now and then to make some change in his position, groaning heavily all the time. So she had sat there through those intolerably long hours of the night, a faint breeze fanning their faces; her head turned resolutely away from him towards the open door, where a thousand glittering fireflies darted about in the soft velvety darkness.

And then came the dawn. For Myra it would have brought an overpowering sense of relief, but for one thing — that, as the morning paled the eastern skies, and the long level streaks of gray luminous clouds crept slowly into the background, the man by whose side she was watching opened his eyes, and began to exhibit all the signs of return-

ing consciousness. Eagerly she leaned forward, striving to distinguish the dim outline of the opposite shanty. If only Bryan would come across the gorge on his way to the river! Surely he would miss her soon?

"Myra!"

It was a hoarse, low whisper almost in her ear. She felt sick with horror, but she turned round. She looked into his strong, passionate face, white and drawn now with pain, and was silent.

"That cowardly — devil has done for me, I fancy. Listen, girl!"

His fingers tightened upon her wrist. Even at such a crisis as this, her horror of the man was such that she could not look at him without shrinking.

"It was my own d——d folly! I got drunk and told him a secret," he muttered. "He wanted a paper. Open my coat, quick!"

She thrust it back. He guided her trembling fingers, and she could feel something stiff between the lining and the cloth.

"Rip that open," he murmured. "There is a little hole in the bottom. Put your finger in it, and tear!"

She obeyed him. The stitches, rotten with age and wear, tore out. She drew from the gap a flat oilskin case.

"Hide it in your dress, quick, and listen!"

She thrust it into her bosom. He drew a hoarse, gurgling breath of relief.

"That bungling, cowardly idiot is sold anyway," he said. "Myra, that paper — is worth a fortune. I give it to you — because you are my wife. See?"

She drew back and looked at him with parted lips and bloodless face.

"Your — your wife!"

She had lost the power of speech. It was all she could say.

"Yes. When I told you that — you weren't — I lied! I was generally lying when I told you anything. The woman I married before had been dead years. You might have guessed it, if you hadn't been — such a soft little fool! I — I married you to make money out of you; you were so d——d pretty. Curse this pain!"

He was silent for a moment. Her eyes, which she had not been able to move from his face, showed her that he was struggling with a deadly faintness.

"D——n you, why don't you do something for me," he gasped, "instead of staring like that? Give me — that bottle!"

He pointed with wavering finger to the black bottle which lay on its side. With a great effort she clenched her teeth and rose. There was a tin mug on the shelf. She filled it with what was left of the liquor, and held it to his lips. He gulped it down to the last drop. The film passed from his eyes, and his fingers ceased to twitch. He was restored.

"If you hadn't been coming back to me — as I bade you, I should have torn this paper up. You see — a devoted wife — is sometimes repaid," he sneered. "I'll tell you how to use it. Let me think."

She sat there waiting with dull confused senses, wondering in a vague sort of way whether it was very wicked to deceive a dying man, as she was doing. Coming back to him! Was that what he thought? Was that how he accounted for her sudden appearance? If only he knew that it was to spy upon him that she had crept out of her bed in the darkness and stolen over to hide amongst the alder bushes, to watch and listen, ay, and to rob, if she had the chance. What would he say, if he knew that? But after all, he would never know. She had gained what she wanted. It was her right. She had suffered at this man's hands villainy that the fortune of a Vanderbilt could never

atone for. She would accept what he had given, and she would do her best to forgive him. It is easy to forgive the dead.

"Myra!"

His voice broke in upon her thoughts. She started, and turned hastily towards him. He had raised himself a little, and his pain seemed to be less acute. He spoke distinctly and even rapidly.

"I needn't waste my breath telling you any of the story," he said. "It's humdrum enough. One of the documents you have to get is a journal written by the man himself. It tells the whole rigmarole. That packet I have given you contains two of the most important papers. The rest, with the diary, are in San Francisco. I left them in safe keeping. I seemed to have some idea that I was being followed about, and I couldn't conceal all of them about me."

"Where are they?" she asked.

"Amies Rutten has them. Curse it, you're not afraid of him still, are you?"

She had started back suddenly, pale and trembling. Even the name of that man was sufficient to make her blood run cold.

"I could never go to him for them!" she said, in a low tone. "I could not! Oh, I could not!"

He caught hold of her wrist, and shook it savagely.

"Don't be such a d——d little fool," he muttered savagely. "He can't hurt you. Take some one with you if you are afraid. He's got the parcel. All you have to do is to go and say I'm done for, and show him — you're listening?"

"Yes," she whispered faintly.

"Show him three crosses on a blank card. That's the sign I agreed upon, if ever I should want that package, and not be able to fetch it myself. The person who showed him

three crosses on a blank card was to be treated as my agent."

"Supposing — he should refuse to give it me? If he knows that you are dead, and that it is valuable, he may want to keep it."

"He may," Mr. Hamilton assented. "Listen, Myra!" he added, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper, and his eyes gleaming. "Supposing he should try it; I am going to let you into a secret. I am going to tell you certain words to say to him. First lift up your hand, and swear that once spoken, you will never breathe them again; you will forget you ever uttered them. Swear, girl, and keep your oath, for there is death in the words. Spoken once, they may serve you. Spoken afterwards, repeated even to yourself, and they will be your destruction. Swear!"

She lifted her hand. The sudden solemnity of his manner had somehow communicated itself to her.

"I swear!" she declared.

Then he clutched her hand, and drew her down until his hot breath fell upon her cheek. No human being could possibly be within earshot of them, but his voice was sunk to a whisper, and once he paused to look half fearfully around. The agitation of his manner was unmistakable. She, too, as though by some species of magnetic sympathy, came under its influence. What power was there he was evoking, so mysterious and so potent, that out here amongst the lonely hills, and in the silent dawn, he could not speak of it save with bated breath and blanched cheeks? She drank in every syllable, every word found its way into the chambers of her memory, and remained there. Throughout the whole of her future life she carried with her a vivid picture of that little scene. There it was, simple, bare, dramatic. The rude interior of the shanty, from the walls of which the unstripped bark hung down in long shreds,

the insects which crawled on the ceiling, the overturned bench, and the black bottle rolling on its side, the man in his rough mining dress who crouched there with this strange new look of awe in his deep-branded, resolute features, and the dark stain of blood which, drop by drop, had trickled down and soaked into the floor. And outside, like some strangely framed silhouette, a vision of gray clouds and mists, dimly seen trees and hills all vague and shadowy in the wan light of the coming dawn. The waking breeze and the strong odour of the pines, these too dwelt in her mind. Nothing was ever forgotten. Even in a life of such vast changes as lay before her, an experience like this has its own peculiar immortality. It baffles new sensations and it defies time. It has its own place, and death alone can dislodge it.

He spoke to her no longer with the cold cynicism of his natural manner, but with deep emphasis and impressiveness. In the shock of his earnestness he was once more a man of education and parts.

"Myra, if he should refuse, if he should divine my death, and seek to play the robber's part, take your pencil and paper and write before him. Write these words:

"'The bow and the iron, the arrow and the steel.
"'MAURICE HUNTLY.'

"Say that after me."

She repeated it rapidly. He nodded approval.

"Listen. If he should still refuse, leave him. Go to José's café. See José himself. Repeat those words to him. He will give you a name and an address. You will seek it out. To the man whom you will find you will tell, without reserve, everything; my death, your desire, everything. Answer all his questions. Have no fear of him. Then go

away and wait. In a few days you will have the papers. Go to England, and you will easily find out — the man who knows. Make your own terms. He will give you what you ask. I went to him but once, and I asked for ten thousand pounds. I had it. You can have more. But remember, treat with him; never with the other. The one who has, you have always under your thumb; but the other, you are powerless with him after you have once parted with your golden egg. And listen. Here is news for you. The other is here, in this country, searching for me. Once I have had suspicions that it might be the Englishman yonder. It is only a guess. Once, as he slept, his features seemed familiar to me. If it be he, guard your secret. Leave him. Remember!"

"I will remember," she echoed.

He sank back again into his former position, and lay there motionless. She bent over him, and looked into his face. His breathing had become fainter, and his eyes were closed. Two great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead, and the fingers of his left hand were tightly clenched. She looked at him shuddering, yet fascinated. Was this death?

And with that self-asked question a vague troubled sense of responsibility swept in upon her. Death! And after death, what? She had no religion. She was utterly a child of nature without any creed of her own, or any desire to possess one. Yet none the less she was instinctively a moralist. Right was right, and wrong was wrong. The world had been made so. For the first time she asked herself, by whom and for what purpose? If there was a reward for well-doing, what was the fate of the evil-doers — the fate of such as this man? Was it any use being sorry? She wondered whether there was anything she ought to say to him, whether she could do any good by reminding him of

the grim passage to eternity through which he was soon to pass. She must say something, she felt. What, she scarcely knew.

She touched him upon the arm, and he opened his eyes.

"Jim, are you sorry?" she whispered.

He laughed, a grim, harsh, discordant laugh.

"Not I," he muttered. "I'm no d——d turncoat! The devil and I have had a high old time, and I'll stick by him. A curse on all canting humbug! If — I had — my time all over again — I'd go it all over again. I've killed men when they've been in my way, and I've made more than one woman miserable. I've plundered, and I've robbed; I've gone my — own way, and it's been a d——d bad one, too! I'll die as I've lived, and take the chance. I'm — no coward."

He fell back exhausted, and closed his eyes. She got up and walked to the door, drinking in great gulps of the fresh morning air with a sense of immeasurable relief. Away eastwards, the sun had risen from behind a bank of purple and red clouds, and its faint light having kissed the snow-crowned mountains was travelling downwards. Below in the valley, little patches of the river and rock-strewn watercourse were dimly visible through a veil of white mist which every moment grew fainter. Now she could see the settlement with its little cluster of cabins and tents and men like black specks moving about as though preparing for the morning's toil. And yonder — ah, yonder at last — was Bryan, standing at the door of his shanty, with his coat over his arm, shading his eyes while he gazed around.

She waved her hand and called out to him. He saw her, and started with surprise. For a moment he hesitated. Then he came striding down the gorge, swinging himself up again on the opposite side to where she was, with a recklessness which more than once made her turn away from watch-

ing him with a shudder. In a moment or two he stood by her side.

"Myra, what on earth are you doing here?" he asked sternly.

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Hush!" she said softly. "Something terrible has happened — in there."

She pointed over her shoulder. His eyes followed her finger, and he saw the prostrate figure.

"What is it?" he asked in a lower tone. "Has Jim got hurt?"

"He has been shot," she answered. "Murdered. He is dying!"

CHAPTER XII

THE VILLAINY OF MR. CHRISTOPHER SKEIN

The little colony of gold-seekers in the valley below were, one and all, early risers. Just as the downward-glancing rays of the sun smote the waters of the Blue River for the first time, gleaming like silver in the deep pools, and at the miniature waterfalls, they commenced to troop out of their shanties, filling the quiet morning air with their gruff salutations and badinage. On the whole, they were a sociable lot, with — for the time and the country — a strong element of respectability. There were black sheep, and plenty of them, but they were in a minority, and the knowledge of it was in itself a restraint. There was a little shooting — not much, and plenty of gambling. But those who indulged in them were looked upon with a certain coldness, and were made somehow to feel themselves delinquents.

In little groups the men sauntered down to their claims, with their tools over their shoulders. Suddenly there was a pause. One or two were looking up at the little shanty perched on the edge of the precipice high above their heads. Others were trying to make out some nearer object, a black crawling figure descending the rough path with slow, painful movements.

"Wonder how Jim and his pard got on last night," remarked one. "Jim 'ud have a high old time, I reckon!"

"It's odds against the little 'un having many of those greenbacks left. I played poker with Jim, and it was tolerable expensive!" grunted another.

"I shouldn't reckon that there little 'un was a softy with the pictures," said a man from the rear. "Them as is weak in the arm and undersized are generally fairly quick with their fingers. Hullo! what the h—ll's that?"

The little black figure was becoming more distinct. They all stopped and watched it draw nearer and nearer.

"By Gad!" cried the first speaker. "It's Jim's pard! All that's left of him, anyhow!"

Mr. Skein it was! His face was bruised and livid with the marks of Mr. Hamilton's fist, and streaked with blood from the fierce scratchings of the brambles into which he had fallen. His clothes were torn, and one side of him was coated with soft red clay. He walked quite lame, and every now and then he fell forward on his hands as though his legs were powerless to support him. Altogether he was a most pitiful-looking object. The men who watched him were of rough calibre, and as he drew near he was greeted with a perfect shout of laughter. They were kindly enough, most of them, but the man's plight was irresistible. Peal after peal of laughter shook the still, sunlit air. But he did not hesitate. He came steadily on, and as he drew near enough for them to see his face and its expression, somehow the laughter died away. An utter silence took its place. They watched him as though fascinated. Speechless he dragged himself on until he stood before them. Then, without a word, he dropped down and rolled over like a log.

They crowded around him, and Dan Cooper pushed his way through with a flask in his hand.

"I reckon Jim's been too almighty rough on him," he remarked, drawing the stopper. "It's a d——d shame!"

There was a gruff murmur of assent. Dan stooped down, lifted the fainting man's head with his own broad palm, and passed some of the liquid down his throat. The result was marvellous. He gave a little groan, and in a moment he sat up.

Again here was a tendency to mirth as they watched him sitting straddle-legged upon a little mound of gravel, with great tears forced out of his eyes by the strength of the liquor, rolling down his cheeks, and noticed the details of his pitiful condition; and again, something which came into his face with the first gleam of awakening consciousness, checked them. They began to have a dim apprehension that the tale this man would have to tell would be no ordinary one. They were right.

He still did not speak, sitting there and blinking round upon them in an odd, dazed sort of way. They were getting impatient, and one or two of them began to fire off questions.

"What did he maul you for, eh?"

"Reckon it was Jim as did it!"

"Where's Jim, anyway?"

There was a moment's silence. Skein turned a white, ghastly face up to them, and the nearest held their breaths.

"Jim's dead!" he said slowly.

There was a little murmur amongst them, but no surprise. They had expected something of the sort. It is probable that if Christopher Skein had boldly declared that he had shot him in self-defence, and merely pointed to his miserable state, they would have slapped him on the back and gone to their work. No one would have dreamed of blaming him. But unfortunately he did not appreciate the camp temperament, and he knew nothing of their habits. He had a legal and conventional mind. Since the first gleams of daylight

he had been lying on his back at the bottom of the gorge, planning how to escape from his horrible plight.

"Did you shoot him?" asked a voice from the rear.

Skein looked up. His eyes were kindled with a frightened yet malignant light. He shuddered where he sat.

"I shoot him! No! I had no firearms. Besides, he was my pard. We were pals. I shoot him! Who dare say so?" he whined.

They looked at one another, perplexed. Dan Cooper elbowed himself to the front, and constituted himself cross-examiner.

"If you didn't, who did?" he asked. "Don't be afraid, we ain't going to hurt you. Don't sit there shivering like a blarmed kitten. Open your mouth like a man, and tell us all about it."

Skein looked up and faced them. What little courage he had, he made a desperate effort to summon to his aid. Now or never he must win his safety.

"It's made me feel all broke up," he commenced, looking around to try and find a little sympathy in their hard, stolid faces, "all broke up anyhow! Jim and me had a real friendly evening together last night, and he got telling me things about himself as confidential as could be. He'd been a bad lot, he said, but he was about sick of going on anyhow. He was going to chuck this up by-and-by, and make a fresh start. Then he told me something I couldn't quite understand, about a very valuable paper he said he had with him. It warn't money, but it was worth a good deal more than money. He seemed to expect that it was going to bring him in a fortune by-and-by. And yet, he said, he was almost afraid to carry it about with him, for a small ring of them had caught scent of it, and they were on his track at San Francisco. One of them was a woman, he told me, and then he broke off, and he didn't talk to me any more for a

good bit, but kept muttering to himself and swearing something awful."

He paused and looked round for encouragement. Every one was listening most intently. Then he glanced quickly up towards the little shanty at the head of the gorge, and shuddered.

"Get on," said one of the men impatiently. "We want to know the end."

Skein blinked rapidly once or twice, and continued:

"Well, he got talking again soon, and after swearing at her something awful, he told me something which scared me. His wife was here; had followed him from San Francisco, he said. She was up in yonder shanty with a chap he called the Britisher."

He pointed to Bryan's shanty, high over their heads, with quivering finger. A little chorus of exclamations ensued.

"Little Bones allowed he saw a stranger up there!"

"How long has she been there, anyway?"

"Reckon that's why that crafty Britisher built his shanty so far away from the rest of us!"

"Guess he thought us chaps weren't quite the sort for lady's society!"

"Go on, anyway."

"Ay, go on!"

"Go on!"

Skein half closed his eyes and continued:

"If the man you call the Britisher camped up there expecting her, Jim camped opposite for the same reason. He was on the watch. But you know Jim's little weakness. He would drink! He was half drunk all last night, and I wasn't up to taking all he said in downright earnest. And so we lay there with the door wide open. I don't know what time it was, but I was woke up in the night with a

revolver shot which seemed to be almost in my ear. I jumped up quick as lightning. Jim was lying on his side groaning, and the bally place was all full of smoke, and just inside the door a woman was standing, with big dark eyes, and a smoking revolver in her hand. I went for her, and she hit me across the face with the revolver. I guess she hadn't a shot left, or I should have had it. Then she turned, and skimmed away like a deer. I followed her blindly, and then seemed for a moment as though I were treading on air, and over that d——d chasm I went. She must have led me there on purpose. I lay there for an hour or two before I could move. Then I clambered up to the shanty and peeped in. Jim was lying there as dead as a door-nail, and I believe by the hang of his coat that his pocket had been cut out. I was just going in when I heard the door of the opposite shanty open and bang to. I don't mind admitting, mates," he wound up, glancing round, " that I bolted. I couldn't have tackled the Englishman and the girl alone if they had set on to me, and I thought — well, I'll hook it down and tell the chaps. They'll know what to do about it. So, down I came."

There was a short silence, and a general desire to get a good view of the man to whose story they had been listening. They crowded round him, and looked over one another's shoulders. He sat there blinking up at them, a sufficiently miserable-looking object. He had been roughly treated, there was no doubt about that.

Dan Cooper, who was in the front rank, was the first to speak.

" This is an awkward story of yours, mate," he said. " I guess you're willing to take your davy on it? "

" I'll swear to every word of it! " Skein declared, lifting up a skinny little hand. " It's the bally truth! "

" All right. Now, boys," continued Dan, turning round,

"what I propose is this: that we draw lots, and say six of us goes up and looks into this. How's that?"

There was a hoarse murmur of assent. A sheet of paper was produced by one of the men, and torn into slender strips. Six pieces were marked with a cross; the remainder were blank. Dan Cooper alone did not draw. By universal consent, he had been called upon to boss the thing.

"I'm waiting, mates!" he announced. "But just remember this. There aren't got to be no whimpering and grumbling afterwards. They'll be seven of us go. What four of us say and holds on to, is the gospel law of Blue River Valley! Is that so?"

There was a chorus of assents. Dan Cooper nodded, shook up the papers which he had been collecting, and distributed them. One by one the men who had drawn a cross stepped out silently from the others, and ranged themselves aside. When the drawing was done, their leader addressed them briefly.

"Now then, chaps," he said, "you want first of all to look to your shooting irons. If we've got to get the girl, the Britisher may cut up rough, and he ain't exactly an infant. I'll allow I ain't seen him shoot, but he's as strong as they make 'em, and if he feels like it, he'd fight if there were twenty of us. All prepared, are you? Well, git, then."

The seven men filed slowly away up the gorge; seven hard, resolute-looking men, to whom the life of a human being was as light a thing as the leaves which fluttered down from the trees on to their heads. Up in the clear blue sky above them a lark had suddenly soared up, pouring out a glad little song to the sunlit air. And down below Skein sat still on his stone with his head between his hands, fighting with the hideous fear which seemed to be stamped upon his white, blanched face. Up in the sky, away in the

bosom of the dark woods, further still on the slopes of the snow-capped Sierras, down on the sandy ground beneath his feet where a blue harebell waved to and fro in the breeze; wherever he looked he saw the same ghastly sight. A man lying on his side with his hand clasped to his breast, and the blood oozing through his fingers, and dripping on to the floor. Look at his face; lips parted in an awful curse, the eyes glaring white with the red fire of a consuming hatred. Oh, how had he dared to do it? How had he dared to do it? Ah, what was that? It was only the soft breeze playing amongst the tree-tops, the sweet music of a summer morning. Why had it sounded to him like a shriek of horror from blanched lips? Was he to be tormented with this for ever? Were the simplest sounds and the sweetest sights ever to wring his heart with these awful memories? Was this indeed the Judgment of God?

CHAPTER XIII

A JURY OF SEVEN

The Englishman and the girl were alone in the shanty. The echoes of his horrified words had scarcely died away. Murdered! Shot! Bryan was dazed. He was not a man of particularly swift perceptions, and the shock of the thing was great.

He stooped down and felt the prostrate man's heart. Then he glanced at the wound, and in doing so noticed the disarrangement of the coat.

"The man has been robbed!" he said, looking up quickly. "Who did it?"

She looked half fearfully around her.

"No one robbed him," she answered. "I cut his coat open. We were alone afterwards. He told me to. He gave me something."

"Who shot him?"

"The stranger — the little man with the squint who came on a mule yesterday morning. I told you about him."

"And what on earth were you doing here?" he asked.

"I — I scarcely know," she faltered. "I was excited by what you told me yesterday, by the thought that this man might be the man for whom you were searching. I could not sleep for thinking of it, so I put on my clothes and crept out. I wanted to get here and look in. If his coat had been

lying where I could have got at it, I think I might have tried to steal that paper. It was for you, Bryan. You are not angry with me, dear? "

"Tell me what you saw," he answered, keeping his eyes fixed upon her. Somehow his look chilled her. She wondered at it, in a vague sort of way she resented it.

"It was very dark," she began. "I was able to get quite close to the shanty. When I was a few yards away, I saw that there was still a light, and I heard voices. I stayed behind a bush, and it was a long time before I dared go any nearer. I just wanted to see who it was with him, and then I was coming away. At last I did see. It was the stranger. He and Jim were nearly drunk, most quite. I couldn't hear much what they were saying, but I made out that they had gone pards in Jim's claim. I was just coming away when I heard Jim begin to talk about some secret that was worth a a fortune to him. The moon was out now, and I could see the stranger's face. He was listening to every word Jim said, with his eyes gleaming and the strangest expression on his face. He whispered something to Jim, and Jim looked real mad. Just then an idea flashed into my mind. This stranger knew all about the secret of Jim's. He had come to try and steal the papers, or get some more information. I remembered how odd he had seemed in the morning. He knew nothing about mining. I wondered then what he had come for. I felt kind of frightened at the thought, and took a step forward. They must have heard me. I saw Jim hand the stranger his revolver; Jim seemed to be too drunk to shoot, himself. The stranger came to the door, and then suddenly turned round. I heard Jim cry out, and then there was a shot. I rushed to the door. Jim was on his back, and the stranger was staggering away from him. Jim had hit him, I guess, and then he saw me, and called out. The stranger was scared to death. He looked at me as though

I were a ghost, and then he rushed past me, and I believe he fell over the gorge."

Bryan stepped backwards and walked to the edge of the chasm which fronted the shanty. He looked over the side, and clambered down a few yards. Then he came back again.

"There is no one there now," he said briefly. "Go on."

The girl's voice dropped. She glanced towards the prostrate figure which lay prone upon the bare floor, the body slightly doubled up, and the arms stretched out. She shuddered. She had never seen any one dead. Was it really true that his ears were deaf for ever and his eyes blind? There was no need, then, for her to lower her voice. Yet she did so.

"I went in and stayed with him," she continued. "He gave me this," she held out a little oilskin case, "and he told me something about the papers it contained and how to get the others. He told me, too, that he had really married me in San Francisco. It didn't make things any better; rather worse, I guess. But he told me, anyway. Won't you take the case, Bryan? It's yours, dear."

He pushed it away from him.

"Not now," he answered.

"You're — you're not angry with me?" she pleaded.

He looked very much like it. He had listened to her with a dark, heavy frown parting his forehead, and now he was silent. He had not the imagination to appreciate what she had done for him; that her stealthy journey into the night, her listening, even her presence with the dying man, all were for his sake. That oilskin case which she had offered to him so timidly, doubtless contained what he had come from England in search of — fortune, name, perhaps rank! Even to himself his silence appeared brutal. She had done all this for him, and he could not even bear to think of it.

He could think of nothing but of the man who lay there with his white face — never so human, so free from brutality before — lightly touched by a long ray of sunlight.

He had heard the girl's story — every word — and weighed and measured it up ruthlessly, utterly ignoring its pathetic side, and the dark, pleading eyes filled now with tears. He thought only of the facts, and the facts were ugly. His own judgment he was reserving. What would be the judgment of others? It all depended upon the stranger — whether he had been seen with Jim, and whether he had fled. He himself had not set eyes upon him, had not heard of him. What if he were a myth; just an invention of Myra's? The facts were more than ugly then. The man had been shot, and apparently robbed. The results of the robbery — Myra had called it a gift, was that likely? — were in her possession. Even accepting her own story as true, putting away that other vague, awful thought which had crept into his mind, even then a little craft on the part of the stranger might easily place her, and, through her, him in a terrible position.

The close air of the little shanty suddenly became stifling. He turned abruptly round and walked outside. Myra crept after him with a heavy heart. It seemed a little hard that he could not speak a single kind word to her. She sat down on a log a few yards away and cried quietly to herself.

The Englishman leaned against the wall of the shanty, and, with folded arms and heavily knit brows, gazed down the valley. The more he thought this affair over, the less he liked it. It was his duty to go down and tell the others what had happened. He must admit that this girl had been living with him, that he had broken their rude laws; he who in a sort of stubborn exclusiveness had held himself aloof from all of them, must answer their questions, perhaps come under their suspicion. But, to do him justice, it was

less of himself he thought than of the man who lay within the shanty. It was an awful thing! Poor chap! It filled him with a sort of annoyance to see how cloudless and bright was the sky, and how gaily the larks were singing in the warm bright air. The whole world seemed gay and joyous, as though nothing out of the common had happened. And there, with his face bathed in the dancing sunshine, and his sightless eyes turned towards the dazzling sky, a man was fighting his gloomy way through the Valley of the Shadow of Death! What a past mistress in the art of mockery was Nature!

The Englishman was suddenly recalled from his abstraction. His eyes resting idly upon the landscape had been attracted by moving objects. There were men filing their way up the gorge. He counted them; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven of them. Dan Cooper leading, and close at hand now. They had heard of the murder, then. There could be no other explanation of their approach. From whom? It was strange that they should have heard of it.

He glanced round towards Myra. Should he warn her? Better not, perhaps. Her defence should not be robbed of a single feature of ingenuousness. She must tell her own story. Well for her — and for him — if they believed it!

The men were close at hand now. One by one they clambered up the side of the gorge. One by one they gravely saluted the Englishman, and then glanced curiously at the girl, who had scarcely looked up at their approach.

"Morning," said Dan Cooper, addressing the Englishman. "Reckon this is a bad business."

"Very bad. Are you going in to look at him?"

"Reckon so."

They all trooped into the little shanty, completely filling

it. Dan Cooper removed his cap as he entered, and the others immediately followed suit. He knelt down and made a brief examination.

"Seems to me he ain't quite dead," he remarked, turning to the Englishman, whose huge form filled the doorway.

"I don't think he is," Bryan answered. "He is bleeding internally, though, I'm afraid, and if so he can't last long."

"That's so."

He rose to his feet, and for a moment every one looked curiously around. Even Jim's simplest domestic articles were objects of a certain interest now. One of the men picked up an open tobacco pouch, and filled his pipe. Silently it was passed round. Then they all trooped out again into the sunshine.

"Where's the gal?" asked Dan Cooper.

She was sitting in the old place, and met all their wondering gazes with a half-contemptuous indifference. She was very pale, and had evidently been crying. Apart from that she exhibited no concern.

They formed a sort of semicircle around her. The Englishman remained outside it, leaning still against the wall of the shanty. His eyes were half closed, but he listened to every word with the keenest interest.

Dan Cooper was spokesman. His voice was gruff, but it sounded kindly. He was not so much in love with his position as when he started.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell us about this 'ere business?" he said, jerking his head backward towards the shanty. "The chaps down yonder have sent me and my mates to sorter clear the matter up. If you've anything to say, we're ready to hear it."

She dried her eyes and looked up.

"I can tell you how it happened, if you like," she said simply. "I guess you want to hear."

"That's so, indeed," was the answer. "Eh, mates?"

There was a gruff chorus of assent. The men sat down on logs, dragging them up from a short distance away, and smoked their pipes in stolid silence. The girl in the middle lifted her face towards Dan Cooper, and told her story. Just as she commenced, the lark shot up again from the gorge and sang over her head.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TOUCH OF FIRE

She told her story in a few plain sentences, without much emotion, but with a direct simplicity which had its effect upon her hearers. It had not occurred to them to doubt Skein's tale. They had expected without a doubt to listen to a confession, and a piteous plea for mercy. This was far more surprising. They stole glances at one another, and then exchanged whispers. The Englishman, although he still stood aloof, noticed all this, and began to suspect something of the truth. Myra, on the other hand, was utterly unconscious of it.

She finished her relation — as much as she thought it concerned these men to know— and then rose to her feet. She did not choose to remain where she was to be the cynosure of all these curious eyes. She would go back to her own shanty. She looked across at Bryan; perhaps he would come too. But he made no sign. He did not even look towards her. He seemed to be listening to what that little group of men now gathered close together were saying.

She took a few steps down the gorge. The men looked up at her movement, and one of them hurried across towards her. He laid his coarse, heavy hand upon her shoulder.

"I reckon we ain't exactly through yet, miss. You'll have to wait a bit."

She drew herself away from his touch, and looked round in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "I don't understand. Is there anything else you want to ask me? If so, be quick, please."

She turned a proud, displeased face upon the little group, holding her skirts in one hand, and the bough of an alder-bush, by means of which she was steadying herself, in the other. It was a little scene by no means lacking in dramatic force. She was standing on the very verge of a precipice, and her thin, supple figure was outlined with wonderful vividness against the background of blue sky. Her head was thrown back, and her hair, all disarranged with bending over the wounded man, was streaming down in a picturesque confusion. Fronting her was the little platform of green turf, with its background of dark pine-woods, on which Mr. Hamilton had built his residence. The men, into whose stolid faces a gleam of admiration had crept, were grouped, some sitting, some standing, around a fallen pine-tree, with their eyes curiously fixed upon her. A few yards away leaned still against the shanty the Englishman with folded arms, awaiting events.

Dan Cooper stepped a little forward from the rest, and addressed her. There was an odd little smile at the corner of his lips, the mystery of which none save himself could have explained.

"I reckon you don't quite understand how things hang," he said. "Perhaps it's only fair to tell you. Skein has been along this morning, down yonder," he added, pointing with his pipe into the valley, "and he allows that this little job was your doing. That's why we're here. That's why me and my mates is kinder taken aback with this story of yours."

She looked at him bewildered. It was hard to realize in a moment.

"My doing? My doing? Do you mean to say that he allows that I shot Jim? Is that it?"

"That's so."

Her bosom heaved, and her dark eyes became distended. She looked them all scornfully in the face.

"He lies!" she answered, without a quiver in her face. "Go and fetch him here, and let him tell his story before me!"

The suggestion seemed to find favour with them. It appealed to certain sportsmanlike instincts common to all mankind. Let them have it out face to face. It was not a bad idea.

They whispered for awhile together. The Englishman stepped forward and interfered for the first time.

"Shall I go and fetch him?" he said.

Dan Cooper shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll send one of my own mates. It'll seem fairer. He's a skeery sort."

The Englishman turned away, but he did not return to his old place. He went over to Myra.

"I shouldn't mind if I were you," he said gruffly. "Sit down and rest for a bit. It'll be all right."

He was by no means so sure of it, but he wanted to say something comforting. His doubts of Myra had been largely founded upon an idea of his own — that the man Skein, of whom she had spoken, was a myth. The fact that he really did exist wonderfully strengthened his confidence in her.

She smiled vaguely but gratefully. As yet she could not quite realize what this thing was that was happening. It seemed like a nightmare: the little ring of men in their rough miner's clothes and coarse, curious faces all turned upon her, the shanty with its wide-open door, and the figure of the man who had been the horror of her life, lying pros-

trate within. She looked across at the valley bathed in sunlight, with the river creeping through it like a vein of silver, at the distant hills and the rolling plain. Nothing had changed. It was not a dream. She was really being accused of this hideous thing, and for his sake as well as her own, she must be brave. She walked back with him to the place where she had been sitting before, and sat down. He remained by her side for a few minutes. Then he walked over and joined the other men. There was no reason why he should hold aloof from them, and he wanted to hear what they had to say. Dan Cooper had gone himself for Skein.

It was a wearisome wait. The sun mounted higher and higher in the heavens, and the men drew back into the shade of the wood. Four of them were playing cards — they had found a pack in the shanty — and the other two stretched themselves out and fell fast asleep. The Englishman and Myra sat side by side, talking only now and then.

Once she whispered to him:

"Bryan — presently, not now, I want you to look at these papers. They are not all, but I know how to get the rest. Fancy their belonging to you!"

"Did he really give them to you, Myra?"

She nodded.

"He thought that I was coming back to him, and he said that he'd as lief I had them as any one else. He told me a lot what to do."

"How to get money for them, I suppose? They are worth money, you know, Myra — great sums of money."

"I guess I won't worry about that," she said. "I don't want money. Not while I have you, Bryan."

His face clouded. He looked away towards the hills with idle eyes. Was he glad to owe the future, which these papers might open up to him, to this girl? At the first

thought he could not make up his mind. Yet he thought not. He would rather have paid for them, fought for them, almost even stolen them.

She laid her hand upon his arm with a sudden gesture. There was a note of triumph in her tone, but also a note of disappointment.

"See, Bryan, he won't come. There's Dan Cooper alone!"

The Englishman's eyes followed her outstretched finger. A solitary figure was scrambling up the gorge towards them. It was Dan Cooper — alone!

The sleepers were awakened, and the card-players finished up their game. They all trooped round in a sort of semicircle. In a minute or two Dan Cooper appeared. His face was dark, and he seemed in an ill-temper.

"Mates," he said, "the little 'un, Skein, is in a bad way. He seems to have got a sort of fever. Anyway, I couldn't drag him up though he were willing to come."

There was a short silence. Every one waited to know what was to be done.

"While I was down yonder," Dan Cooper continued, jerking his thumb downward in the direction of the valley, "I remembered that poor Jim's coat was cut open; 'pears as though he had been robbed. I know I've heard him say that he carried papers or something valuable about with him. Well, the question seems to me to be, who's got those papers? Skein ain't got 'em, 'cause I've searched him well. How about you, young woman?" he asked, turning abruptly towards Myra.

Her cheeks flushed.

"I have the papers," she said, folding her hands upon her bosom. "Jim gave them to me himself. I had a right to them. I was his wife."

There was a dead silence. The Englishman looked dis-

turbed. The fact of Myra's having the papers seemed to have made an impression upon the men.

"Have you any writing to prove that you were his wife?" Dan Cooper asked.

She shook her head.

"You don't wear a wedding-ring."

"I threw it away," she said, in a low tone. "Jim never used me well."

Dan Cooper turned away and talked to the men. Bryan turned pale. Only Myra seemed unmoved. The consultation between the men lasted nearly a quarter of an hour. Then Dan turned round.

"My mates and me is pretty well agreed," he said slowly, with his eyes fixed upon Myra. "We sorter think that you did this job. If you were a man we should string you up on that tree like winking. But we none of us quite fancies hanging a woman, and we're going to talk it over quietly, what to do. See?"

He left off suddenly, and affected to be very busy filling his pipe. The steady look in that girl's dark eyes confused him.

"We shall take you down with us, and shut you up until to-morrow," he continued. "Reckon we shall have made up our minds by then. Anyway, get ready to come along."

"Hold on a bit!"

Dan Cooper had laid his hand upon the girl's wrist. At the sound of the imperative voice, he looked quickly round. He was confronted with the dark muzzle of a revolver at full cock.

The Englishman was standing out by the girl's side. His blue eyes were flashing with anger, and there was a set, firm look in his face which meant mischief.

"Loose that girl!" he thundered.

Dan Cooper obeyed at once. There was something

wonderfully persuasive about that shining barrel on which the sunlight was flashing.

"I think it's about time for me to say a word or two." Bryan commenced sternly. "The girl's not having fair play. There's no more evidence against her than against the man Skein. Why assume her guilty, and him innocent?"

Two out of the six men growled a surly assent. There had not been the unanimity about their opinion which Dan Cooper had insinuated. A third was wavering.

"How about the papers?" growled Dan Cooper, casting a furious glance behind him.

"The girl told the truth," Bryan continued. "The man was her husband. I knew it. He gave her the papers. I will tell you the story of Jim Hamilton's murder. He carried these valuable papers with him, and like a fool, when he was in liquor, he bragged about it. This mean hound, Skein, followed him here after them and nothing else. That is why he goes pards with Jim. The story of the murder itself you know. Afterwards Skein found that he could not escape from here without stores and supplies, so he made up this lying story, and when he is challenged to repeat it before the girl, he skulks down yonder, afraid! What do you say, mates?" he added, turning to the men. "Doesn't my story sound likely?"

"That's so, boss."

"Reckon the Britisher's right."

"Guess we'll leave the girl alone."

Three of the men spoke out in her favour. Dan Cooper, throwing an evil look behind him, noted this fact.

"Very well," he said harshly. "If the girl's innocent, so much the better. We'll do nothing till Skein's well, eh? Are you chaps all agreeable?"

"Guess so," they chorussed.

The Englishman nodded.

"Very well, then," Dan Cooper said. "You'll have to come along with us until the matter's settled up, my girl. Do you hear?"

He stretched out his hand, but again stayed it suddenly. The Englishman's revolver was flashing once more in the sunlight, and the sound of his voice rang out like a pistol-shot.

"Hands off, Dan Cooper! The girl's mine, and you don't take her away. Do you hear? I'll shoot the first man who lays his hand upon her."

Dan Cooper flashed a savage look across at the speaker. He did his best to smother his rage, but his voice shook with anger.

"That won't do," he said. "We've got to watch the girl, and we're not going to leave her outside the borders of the settlement where she can bolt any moment she chooses. That isn't good enough for us. She'll have to come along with us, eh, lads?"

"She shall not stir a yard with you," was the steadfast answer. "Now listen. She shall live in my shanty, and I will go with my pard, Pete. You can have a sentry up there if you like, and so long as you do not molest her, I give my word as an Englishman, not to help her to escape. I can't say fairer. What do you think, mates?"

"That's all right. Guess that's good enough."

Dan Cooper bit his lip, but he disputed no more. He turned away, shrugging his shoulders.

"Guess we'll send some one up to see that you don't forget, and feel like trying the western air," he remarked with a sneer. "Come, mates, one of us has got to stay and see whether Jim comes to again before he dies, and afterwards watch yonder shanty. Guess we'd better draw lots."

Bryan passed his arm around the girl's waist, and drew her away.

"You're about done up, Myra," he said kindly. "Come along, we'll leave them to it now. I wouldn't worry."

She brushed the tears away, and checked a little hysterical sob which had almost broken from her lips.

"I won't, Bryan," she said. "After all, there's some good come of it. We've got the papers, Bryan," she added timidly. "If they're very — very valuable, you'll care for me — just a little — won't you?"

He took her hand awkwardly.

"Of course I will," he said. "Let's go somewhere in a cool place and read them. We'll go and get some breakfast first, though. Keep in the shade as much as you can."

They crossed the gorge and entered the shanty. On the other side of the cleft a man stood out in the fierce sunshine watching them. Dan Cooper was never handsome to look at, and just now his features were distorted by a particularly disagreeable scowl.

"D——n that Britisher and his cool tongue!" he muttered. "I'll be even with him if I have to taste lead for it."

He raised his fist and shook it over at the shanty. Then he turned and disappeared down the path which led into the valley.

CHAPTER XV

A ROUGH WOOING

The hush of midnight had fallen upon the valley of the Blue River. Dan Cooper had closed his store, and for lack of other shelter, even the wildest of the little colony had shut themselves up in their own huts. All sound of voices or human movement had died away. There was only the deep, murmurous flow of the river, and the soft splashing of the tiny streamlets which leaped from the ravine on to its broad dark bosom, to break an utter and intense stillness.

A soft white mist had stolen upwards from the overheated earth, and hung between sky and land, a dim, ghostly veil through which the moonlight shone faintly, and with a wan, imperfect light. There was no breeze, scarcely a breath of air. The pine-trees, perfectly rigid and motionless, stood out like carved and embossed sculpture upon a deep blue background. It was a typical Southern night, save perhaps in a curious absence of all animal life or movement. The scene was almost like a painted picture upon a huge canvas. It lacked but one thing — life.

Stay! Was all human life, after all, lacking? Out of the deep shadow of the woods which fringed the precipitous path from the valley, a dark figure swiftly but cautiously stepped, and paused for a moment. He lifted his face to the two cottages which crowned the hill high above him.

The nearest, Pete Morrison's, was unlit and gloomy; in the further one a dim light was still burning. It was towards this one he looked the longest.

"What a cursed still night!" he muttered between his teeth. "If she screams, they'll hear her. D——n it!"

He stood still, glancing from one shanty to another as though measuring the distance with his eye. Then he commenced cautiously to scramble up on to the miniature terrace of green turf above. Once or twice a loose stone yielded beneath his feet, and rolled down the ravine, finding, however, a noiseless bed in the thick bushes which jutted out from the sides. Each time he waited, holding his breath, and listening for the sound which never came. It took him quite ten minutes before he reached the top, and hoisted himself on to the smooth green turf.

He landed about midway between the two shanties. First he glanced cautiously over his right shoulder towards Pete Morrison's. It was perfectly dark, there was no sign of life anywhere about it. Then he stole softly along towards the other hut, keeping his hand on the butt-end of his revolver which stuck out from his belt, and with all the air of a man bound upon some desperate enterprise.

Close to the threshold he paused. There was a dark object stretched under an alder-bush but a few yards away. It was the man who had been chosen to act as sentinel to the prisoner — fast asleep.

Cooper dropped on one knee, and bent close over him.

"Tom," he whispered hoarsely. "Wake up."

Tom sat up with a start. He would have uttered a cry, but that he was quite unable to move his lips. Dan Cooper's rough, strong hand was covering his mouth.

"Don't make a row," he said. "It's only me — Dan Cooper. Haven't you got eyes in your head?"

"What d'ye want," the man grumbled, "waking a chap out of his sleep like that? What's wrong, eh?"

"There's nothing wrong," Cooper answered. "Only the chaps were talking, and they allowed that it was rather rough for you to pass the whole night up here. Jim Coates, he thought we ought to take it in turns, three hours each. Anyway, I offered to come up and relieve you about one o'clock, and here I am. You can scoot now. Sh! Don't make a row!"

"I'd as lief have stayed here," the man muttered. "I should have slept till morning if you hadn't woke me."

"Yes, and let the girl escape, if she'd a mind to!" Dan Cooper answered, frowning. "You weren't sent here to sleep. Sheer off."

The man looked at him and grinned.

"That's all gammon," he said. "I reckon this is a put-up thing o' your own, Dan. Want the gel, eh? Well, you try. She's a-sitting in there with all her togs on, ready to squeal her head off if a chap speaks to her. You try. I guess you'll soon want to chuck it, anyway."

He staggered off, stretching himself and yawning. Dan watched him disappear in grim silence. Then he strode to the edge of the ravine, and watched there with folded arms. Before long, the man whom he had relieved reached the bottom of the chasm, and without a backward glance, plunged into the winding plantation which led down into the valley. Dan turned away satisfied. He had really gone. If only that cursed Englishman were out of earshot!

He looked to the priming of his revolver, and carefully placed it in a convenient position in his belt. Then he strode softly up to the door of the shanty, and pressed himself flat against it. There was a crack midway down where the new wood had warped. He put his eye to the opening and looked in.

The man whom he had sent away had evidently spoken the truth. She was sitting on the edge of the bed fully dressed, and with only her hair in disorder. Her eyes were downcast, but she was not sleeping. On the contrary, her head was bent a little forward as though she had been disturbed by the muffled voices outside, and was listening.

Dan Cooper watched for fully five minutes without making any movement. In the wan light his face seemed to grow paler, and his red, bloodshot eyes more bright. Never once did he look away from the slim, graceful figure of the girl who sat there watching and fearful. When at last he stepped noiselessly back, he drew a quick little breath, and set his teeth close together. He glanced searchingly at the little shanty below. There was no sign of any light or movement about it. It stood out like a dark spot upon the moonlit platform of turf, with a background of space bounded only by the far-away shadowy mountains. Dan Cooper smiled, a slow, evil smile. If the Englishman had been a man he would have been on guard here to-night. So much the better, however.

He moved back to his former position, and raising the rude latch, thrust open the door. There were no bolts or other means of preventing ingress, but a wooden bench had been propped up against it, which fell clattering over now upon the wooden floor. Dan Cooper calmly closed the door behind him, and kicked the bench out of the way. Then he bent his steady gaze upon the girl, who had risen to her feet, and was standing facing him, the colour coming and going in her dusky cheeks, and her bosom heaving fast.

"How dare you come in here?" she cried. "What do you want?"

He folded his arms and laughed softly. What fools these women were! The girl must know that she was in his power. Why could she not make up her mind to it, instead

of glaring at him like a wild animal of the woods? Perhaps she was doing it for effect. Dan Cooper was not exactly an artist, but he knew enough to appreciate her enhanced beauty as she shrank away from him, her lithe, shapely body all quivering with emotion, and her breath coming and going in quick little gasps, like a hunted creature at bay. He looked at her in sullen, brutish admiration, and his eyes burned.

"What? I want to talk with you," he said thickly. "Sit down, gel. I shan't hurt you."

From the first she had recognized him as the spokesman of her accusers. With her woman's instinct, too, she feared him and his visit.

"I'd as lief stand," she answered. "Be quick, please."

He laughed hoarsely.

"'Pears to me, young lady, you're taking things kinder easy. The chaps down yonder are about fixed agin yer. They allow as it was you as shot Jim. They've most made up their minds about that."

"It's a lie," she cried. "That little hound, Skein, shot him. Jim told me so himself."

He shrugged his shoulders, and spat upon the floor.

"May be so," he answered. "You see there warn't no witnesses, and it just happens as how the chaps has got it into their heads as you done it. They're dead set on that — mighty dead set on it. There's nine on us 'lected to see this thing through, and out of that nine I reckon I'm the only one as ain't set that way."

She remained silent. He moved a step nearer to her, and continued. There was no lamp or candle in the shanty, but the moonlight was flooding in through the open casement, and fell in a long, level line across the floor. To her it revealed the gross bestiality of the man, with his fierce animal nature all afire. To him it showed a woman more

beautiful than any he had ever seen in his life, more delicately lovely than ever in the faint white light.

"I reckon you're in about as snug a hole as ever a gel walked into," he continued. "First of all, you ain't got no right here at all. It's agin the law, and if there warn't anything else to answer for, I reckon we should be packing you and that d——d Englishman off to-morrow. But after breaking our rules by coming here at all, you must go and make a further mess of it by getting mixed up with this 'ere shooting business. It don't come sorter natural to line up a female, but it's what the chaps are talking of, and they mean business."

She raised her head proudly, and her eyes flashed fire.

"Then let them do it," she said. "Why have you come here now to tell me all about it, and try to scare me?"

"Because I want to help you, and I reckon I'm about the only one as can. I'm kinder thinking, too, that you and me ain't altogether strangers either," he continued, looking at her fixedly. "Ain't I seen you at José's — José's, back of Seventh Avenue, yer know?"

She held out both her hands in front of her face with a gesture of horror.

"No! no!" she cried. "That is all over. For pity's sake don't say that you saw me there. Don't remind me of it. It is like a bad dream."

He spat upon the floor and looked at her curiously.

"You're an odd sort," he continued. "I seen you there all the same; you ain't exactly the cut of a gel as a man sees and forgets. I ain't forgot yer, yer see. Yer was a cut above me then, for I was dead stone broke, and hadn't got a dollar, but I guess we're on level terms now. Anyway, I'm reckoning on being a friend to you. Here's my proposal. I'll stop the chaps doing anything to yer for coming here agin rules, and I'll get yer out of that darned shooting business.

If they feels set on hanging, we'll hang Skein. I reckon he deserves it anyway."

"And — what for?" she gasped.

"Ay, what for?" he repeated, with a sudden light flashing across his coarse face. "You'll come right along with me. That's what I'll do it for — yerself. I guess I don't far off run these diggin's, and as soon as you're inside my store, there ain't no one going to lay a finger upon yer. As for that d——d Englishman of yours, I'll let daylight into him if he so much as whines. If he takes it like a man he can stop on, and I shan't interfere with him. Now then. Speak up! Are you ready to come along? I guess you'd better be."

He took a quick step forward and stood over her, so close that his hot breath seemed to burn her cheek. She sprang backwards, just escaping from his grasp, and stood rigid against the wall, her face white, and her dark eyes afire.

"Don't you touch me!" she cried. "Don't come near me! Oh, how dare you, how dare you!"

Dan Cooper thrust his great hands loosely through his belt, and laughed out loud.

"Ha! ha! ha! Myra, my gel, you've just got to climb down from that style of talking. How dare I? Come, I like that. You've been living with one man, ain't yer? — picked him up at José's, I'll be bound. What's the difference between living wi' him and coming to live along wi' me? I'll lay odds I can show a hundred dollars for every one he's got, and when this blooming claim's worked up we'll get back to 'Frisco and have a high old time. I'm making a pile, my gel, making it fast, and we'll spend it together by-and-by. I shan't chuck you over, don't you fear. I'll make a lady of you. Come, no darned nonsense!"

He put his arm round her waist and tried to draw her towards him. She could retreat no further, but she shook

him off, and with her back against the wall she struck him across the face and spat at him. Her cheeks were perfectly colourless save for one vivid spot of scarlet on either side, but her eyes were blazing.

"You beast!" she cried. "Let me go. Do you think that I would not sooner die than go with you? Let me alone, or I shall kill you! Bryan, help! help!"

Her cry rang out through the open door and across the deep gorge, stirring strange echoes in the pine-woods opposite. Dan Cooper clapped his great, coarse hand over her mouth, and swore a great and venomous oath.

"You wild cat!" he muttered. "You won't listen to reason, eh? I guess I'll make you. I'm going to take you with me when I leave this place, whether you like it or not. Leave loose, you little spitfire! Curse you, leave loose!"

She had wrenched herself away, leaving a portion of her dress in his hand, and sprang towards the door, wild and disordered, yet with a certain fierce, grand dignity which was like fuel to the fire of Dan Cooper's admiration. He barred the way with his great body, but he did not offer to touch her again for the moment.

"You little fool!" he exclaimed, with a certain coarse good-humour. "You've got to come with me or be hung. I shan't keep you for ever. Guess I'll soon be tired of you, and you can go back to your Britisher then, if you want. What the h—ll are you making such a fuss about it for? One man's as good as another, I guess. You didn't go to José's for nothing, I suppose!" he sneered.

She crouched down before him. The sense of her utter physical impotence in the face of his burly strength filled her with a great shivering fear. Her fiery indignation was suddenly changed into a note of passionate entreaty.

"Oh, you do not understand," she cried. "There is no sin in my living with him, for I love him; but you — don't

let me think of it. Spare me! For God's sake, spare me! I would sooner die here on the floor than go with you. If you force me to, I shall kill myself. I mean it. I shall kill myself with the first weapon I can find, and it will be you who will have driven me to it. Let them hang me if they want to. I'll submit. I'll stay here quietly. I won't try to escape. Only don't touch me! For the love of God don't touch me!"

He looked at her with a smile, curious and evil, stealing across his face. The passionate entreaty died out of her tone like a wail. She felt that it was useless. There was something in his face which chilled her to the very soul. She looked away from him, out of the empty casement, out upon that little framed picture of the night starred with golden fireflies upon a soft background of darkness. The pine-stumps stood straight and stark against the deep blue sky. There was no movement anywhere. Not even a blade of grass stirred, and the heavy pink and white blossoms of the flowering shrubs drooped their heads without a rustle. She looked out upon it with a sort of rapt wistfulness, with something of the infinite pathos with which a condemned prisoner looks for the last time upon the earth he leaves.

Dan Cooper set his teeth tight, and stooping suddenly down, pinioned her from behind. She was powerless for the moment, and she knew it. She did not attempt to move.

"Quit fooling," he said, looking close into her eyes, and speaking with a tense savageness which made his voice sound like a hiss. "You can kill yourself when I've done with you, if you like. But to-night ——"

He broke off short in his speech. Myra leaned forward, holding her breath. Her whole being seemed arrested in that one effort of listening. He too had turned towards the door, with a face as dark as the night itself. There had

been some slight sound outside. It might have been an animal stealing out of the woods, or ——

The door was quietly thrown open. The Englishman's huge form filled the space. A second shadow fell across the floor. It was Pete Morrison leaning through the window-frame.

CHAPTER XVI

EASTWARDS

For a moment or two it was a curious and a silent tableau; Dan Cooper glanced from one to the other of the new-comers like a wild trapped animal. Then his hand stole down towards his belt.

"Throw 'em up!"

The voice was soft and persuasive. It came from Pete Morrison, and it was accompanied by the dull flash of steel suddenly glancing out into the moonlight. Dan Cooper cowered back, and then sprang towards the door. He looked into the dark barrel of the Englishman's revolver.

"Curse you both!" he cried hoarsely, raising his unwilling hands. "Let me go."

Bryan stood away from the doorway. "You may come out!" he said shortly.

Dan Cooper bent his head, and stepped out into the moonlight. The two men still covered him with their revolvers.

"Take off your belt!" the Englishman ordered.

"I'll be d——d if I do!"

"Take off your belt!" Bryan repeated.

He opened his mouth to refuse with an oath, but something in the Englishman's face checked the words upon his

lips. Silently he unbuckled it, and it slipped on to the ground. Bryan walked over to his partner and handed him his revolver. Then he turned and faced his antagonist.

"Dan Cooper," he said quietly, but with a curious light in his eyes, "you're a blackguard, and I'm going to give you a good English thrashing! Come on!"

He threw off his hat and coat, and rolled up the sleeves of his red shirt. His opponent followed his example after one quick, stealthy glance towards his belt, which, however, Pete had calmly appropriated. They stood face to face on the little plateau of turf in the bright moonlight; the Englishman calm and stolid, Dan Cooper pale and furious with anger. Then they fought.

It was all over in ten minutes. Dan Cooper lay on his side groaning heavily, and making no effort to rise. Bryan, after waiting for a moment, put on his coat, and walked on one side with his partner.

"There'll be the old Harry to pay in the morning, when this brute gets down yonder!" he remarked, jerking his head in the direction of the valley.

Pete Morrison withdrew his pipe from his mouth, and spat. He had watched the fight with all the calm indifference of a casual spectator, having had no fear whatever as to the result.

"You must git, and sharp!" he said. "I've been down amongst the chaps. Guess they'll follow Dan like a flock of sheep. He runs the liquor, you see! You and the gel have got to be t'other side of yon ridge before morning."

He pointed with his pipe towards the plain. The Englishman knit his brows.

"We can't get away before morning," he said. "I've got no supplies here — no mule! Just as we're in luck, too!"

"Ye're wrong for once, pard!" Pete answered. "See yonder."

He drew him on one side. Behind a huge shrub two mules were tethered — one with a bundle strapped on to its back.

"I fixed it all up this afternoon!" Pete continued, in answer to Bryan's questioning glance. "It warn't difficult to size things up then! There's grub enough there to stand you out, if you've anything like luck!"

Bryan took his partner by the hand.

"You're a good fellow, Pete," he said heartily. "I suppose I must go, for the girl's sake, but it's rough! We've begun to pick gold up like dirt!"

"You'll lose nothing! Not a cent!" Pete answered. "I'll take help on to-morrow, and you shall have your share, honest and straight. Take the gel and be off! See yonder!"

He pointed to the far east. A faint white line was parting the clouds, forerunner of the dawn. Bryan hesitated no longer. He hurried into the shanty, where Myra was sitting with her face buried in her hands.

"Get your things together quickly, Myra!" he said. "We're off, you and I!"

The colour leaped into her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. She flew around, collecting her few belongings.

"I feel real mean," she said. "If it wasn't for me, you could have stayed on and made your fortune!"

"I'm sick of it!" he answered. "I'm ready to go, anyway! Besides, we've got the papers! I want to take them back to England. I'm homesick! Here, give me the bundle!"

His own preparations were swiftly made. In a few minutes they were out and ready to start. He lifted Myra on to one of the mules, and took the leading rein of the other. Then he turned and held out his hand to his partner.

"Pete, you and I have been good pards! Shake, old chap!"

They grasped hands. Pete's bony face was twitching. He held out a pencil and a piece of paper.

"I want your fixings in England!" he said. "I shall send you an account of how your share goes! You'll never have to work again, I reckon!"

Bryan thought for a moment, and then scribbled an address. One more handshake and they were off.

Slowly they wound their way down into the valley. Before them, the dawn was lightening the sky, and as they travelled on towards the plain, the sun burst through the rosy bank of clouds, and shone in their faces. Far away behind, a mere speck upon the hillside, Pete stood up just where they had left him, and seeing them in the broad track of the sunlight, he waved his hand in farewell. And only a few yards away, Dan Cooper sat up on the turf, and turning an evil face towards them, shook his fist in the air, and swore a deep, profane oath. So they left the Valley of the Blue River, and entered upon the desert.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NIGHT CRY

It was the afternoon of the fifth day, and they were almost in the middle of the great plain which lay between the Blue River diggings and the capital of the Western world. Already there were gathering symptoms of the swift twilight soon to settle down upon them. Bryan patted the tired mule which he was leading — there was but one now — and spoke to it encouragingly.

"Just a bit further, Pete! Good old man! Stiff, Myra?" he added, looking up at her.

"Guess I'll walk a bit!" she answered, slipping off. "Pete's got load enough without me. How much further are we going?"

The Englishman did not answer for a moment. He stepped on to a hillock, and shading his eyes from the fierce glare of the setting sun, he gazed long and searchingly down the track by which they had come. Watching him closely, Myra was aware of a certain harassed anxiety in his jaded face. It was the return of an expression which she had once or twice surprised there during the long day's travel. She stepped up to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Why are you looking behind, Bryan?" she asked. "I wish you'd tell me. Is there anything fresh to fear? You've been sorter silent all day!"

He hesitated. "It's nothing!" he answered. "Maybe I didn't sleep much last night — don't think I did, anyway — and I felt tired this morning. We'll push on as far as yonder ridge. I don't seem to like camping in the midst of all these shrubs and things. Too much cover! Gee up, Pete!"

They walked on side by side — the man abstracted, but whistling softly, and feigning indifference; the girl watchful. Presently she touched his arm.

"Bryan!"

"Yes?"

"It's mean of you to treat me as though I were some silly chit of a city girl — real mean!"

"Why, what's amiss, Myra?"

"You know quite well! You've been keeping something from me all day. Why have you been climbing every little hill we've passed on pretence of looking ahead, and then looked behind all the time? Why won't you camp here amongst the brush like we have other nights? Tell me! Is — is any one following us?"

He looked down at her for a moment, and then nodded.

"I'm afraid so, Myra! I don't quite understand it, but I'm afraid there's no doubt — that some one is on our track!"

She took off her hat, and the evening breeze which was just beginning to steal across the plain swept through her coils of dark, loose hair, and cooled her heated face. Then she took hold of his arm.

"Well, go on! Tell me!" she said brightly. "I'm not skeered! Tell me everything!"

"There isn't much to tell!" he said grimly. "You know Janette was gone when we woke this morning!"

"Yes! She'd broken away, hadn't she?"

He drew a piece of rope from his pocket, and showed it to her. She took it in her fingers, and examined it.

"Why, it's cut!" she exclaimed.

"That's so!" he admitted. "It was cut during the night!"

The colour rushed from her cheeks, but she recovered herself almost immediately. It was for her sake that he was here — that they stood in this danger. She would sooner die than add to his troubles by showing her fear.

"Some one must have been quite close to us during the night!" she said, unconsciously dropping her voice. "Makes one feel kinder shivery, don't it?"

They were crossing a slight eminence, and as though with one accord, they both turned round and looked behind. So far as the eye could see, there was no moving object. They were out of sight of the mountains, and there was no longer any background to the dim blue horizon where plain and sky seemed to melt into one another. But dotted about all over the rough broken surface of the country were clumps of alder shrubs and straggling bushes. It was towards these that the Englishman looked long and earnestly.

"Yes, some one must have been quite close to us," he said slowly; "some one who didn't mean us any particular good, either. You're real plucky girl, Myra, and you may as well know now as to-morrow or the next day. Whoever it was, they helped themselves to our stores pretty freely. Quite half our things are gone — and we hadn't much to spare. If my waking up hadn't disturbed them, I don't suppose that we should have had a thing left!"

She glanced over towards their package. Its size appeared undiminished. His eyes followed hers, and he divined her thoughts.

"I stuffed a lot of grass and things in while you were

asleep," he said. "I didn't want you to know! I thought you'd be scared!"

"It was real thoughtful of you — but I'd just as lief have known!" she answered. "I wouldn't have eaten so much, either!"

"It isn't that!" he answered slowly. "We'll perhaps be able to rub on for food, but — they haven't left us much water!"

She looked up at him and shuddered. He kept his face turned away from her.

"Is there — any at all?" she whispered.

"A little — about one bowlful!" he answered. "I dare say it'll last us. We shall be out of this infernal sterile region presently. There are the Koomer hills to cross, you know — it's been a dry season, but there's almost certain to be water there. Then we shall soon join the track that leads to Christopher's Creek, and we may fall in with some diggers. We'll camp here, Myra! It's well on the open!"

They tethered the mule, and, rather reluctantly, he handed her the package. She opened it with sinking heart. Quite three-quarters of its contents were gone. For a moment, her eyes were dim. Then she brushed the tears away, and forced a little laugh.

"I guess it'll be a mean supper to-night, old boy!" she said lightly. "No tea, anyway!"

He looked round, relieved at her tone. "I'm going to make a great fire, all the same," he said. "I don't think we shall have any prowlers to-night."

He built up some logs of wood which he had been collecting, and applied a match. They flared up almost at once. Then he loosened his belt, and looked to his revolver with more care than usual.

"How about the cartridges?" she asked.

"Gone!" he answered shortly. "I have four charges in my revolver, and I don't think there are four of them after us, or they'd have closed in before now. Four charges mean four men's lives! I shan't feel like missing!"

"Who do you think it is?" she asked.

"Dan Cooper, most likely, and perhaps a pal. That little hound who shot Jim may be in it. I don't understand why they didn't do for me last night instead of just stealing our things. There's one thing to be grateful for, though: they didn't find the baccy. Pete put it in the mustard tin, and they chucked it down without opening it!"

He filled his pipe, and, leaning forward, lit it by one of the dancing flames. Unseen by Myra, he had slipped half his supper back again. The pipe would do as well!

They sat together in silence. His arm was around her waist, her head had fallen upon his shoulder. Slowly the soft darkness of the Californian night fell around them, pierced only by those lurid tongues of crackling flames which leaped upwards from the fire he had kindled. One by one the stars crept out into the dark blue sky, and in the distance the fireflies danced around the alder bushes. A great hush seemed to have fallen upon the earth.

"Kinder lonesome, isn't it?" Myra whispered, her hand stealing into his.

He nodded, with his eyes fixed steadily upon the nearest range of alder bushes.

"Seems so!" he answered laconically.

She shuddered a little at the meaning in his words.

"You don't see anything, do you?" she asked under her breath.

He shook his head. "No; and don't expect to!" he declared reassuringly. "I don't think that they will trouble us to-night, Myra. They'll know that we shall be on the alert. I'm going to keep up a blazing fire, and if any

one passes that line of shrubs yonder, they are within the range of my revolver; and I'm in just about the humour to shoot straight!" he answered grimly.

"But you're not going to sit up all night?" she said. "Can't I watch some of the time?"

He patted her little hand tenderly, and reached out for the blanket.

"No; I'd rather sit up myself," he answered. "Besides, you're tired and I'm not! Directly there's a tinge of light yonder," he waved his hand eastward, "I shall wake you and take a nap for an hour. Now, good night, little woman! Sleep well!"

She bent forward, holding up her face to him, and he kissed her with a rough sort of tenderness which seemed characteristic of the man. Her dark eyes were wonderfully soft and bright in the glow of the ruddy flames.

"I'm sorry, Bryan, real sorry!" she whispered. "It's all through me, your having to leave the diggings, and being in danger like this. I guess you're sorry I came after you!"

He did not care to ask himself whether her words were true, for the sad wistfulness of her tone had touched his heart. He denied it instantly, and stooping down kissed her again, and of his own accord. It was an unusual thing for him to do.

"Don't you worry, Myra," he said hopefully. "We shall pull through this all right. Go to sleep now, there's a dear little woman!"

She leaned back with a contented sigh, and closed her eyes; with awkward care he threw the other blanket over her. Then he relit his pipe, which had gone out whilst they had been talking, with a piece of smouldering wood, and turned his face towards the point of danger.

Slowly the long hours of night dragged themselves away.

Still he sat like a carved image, only moving now and then to replenish the fire; watching and listening.

It was past midnight. There had been five hours of darkness, and all that time there had been no sound. Suddenly the deep, intense hush of the night which brooded over the desert was broken in a strange, almost grotesque manner. From the long straggling cover of stunted alder-trees there had rung out upon the breathless night a peal of harsh, strident laughter.

The Englishman sprang to his feet, and moved a step forward, his revolver clenched in his hand, and his eyes striving to penetrate the gloom beneath those thickly growing boughs. Myra, too, had been startled from her deep sleep, and stood by his side, with pale, horror-stricken face.

"What — what was it?" she whispered, clinging to his left arm.

"I don't quite know!" he answered coolly. "It sounded like a man's laugh. Keep still!"

Minutes which seemed like hours passed slowly away. Then suddenly the sound was repeated, only this time there was a more human note in the laughter — for such it certainly was. Bryan raised his revolver, and pointed it to the spot whence the sound had come, but he lowered it again almost immediately. The cover was scarcely within range, and he had but four shots.

He took another step forward, and raised his voice.

"Is that you, Dan Cooper?" he cried. "Come out and show yourselves, you skulking cowards!" he thundered into the darkness.

There was no answer — no repetition of the sound. Again that unbroken silence reigned upon the earth. They piled up the logs, and the red, lurid flames cast their fantastic light to the very borders of the alder bushes. But in the

shadows beyond there was darkness — darkness and silence. Hour after hour, they watched and waited in vain, even Myra never daring to think of sleep. But there came no further sound. No human being appeared within the broad circle of that burning light.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PASSION IN THE DESERT

Once more it was evening. Another day of journeying across the dry, arid plain under a burning sun, was over. Once more the night was before them; the night with its vague terrors and forced inaction.

They made their little preparations with scant exchange of words — there was so little to be said that did not savour of despair. When the time came for setting out their evening meal, Myra spread on the ground before them the slender remains of their little stock, and pointed to it with tears in her eyes.

"How much do you think we ought to take, Bryan?" she asked timidly. "I am not very hungry."

"And I have my pipe and tobacco, thank God!" he put in quickly. "Let's see — there's nearly half a tin of beef left. We'll divide that, and share a piece of hard tack. That'll leave about as much for to-morrow!"

"And after that?" she asked fearfully.

"We must trust to what turns up!" he said, with a dry little laugh. "We should be on the track by then, of diggers going to and fro from Christopher's Creek."

"You know that we have no water!" she faltered.

"Yes, I know it!" he answered. "We must hope to reach the hills to-morrow!"

They ate a little, but their mouths were parched and dry. The long day's travel in the burning heat without water or sufficient nourishment had had its effect upon them. The Englishman's eyes were bloodshot, and underneath them were deep black lines. There was a wan look about his face, too, as though of great physical exhaustion. Myra watched him with an aching heart. It was she who had brought him out into this desert. It was for her sake and in her defence he had incurred the bitter hatred of these men who, without doubt, were hunting them down. She had scarcely a thought for the straits in which she herself was. Hunger and thirst and fatigue were forgotten in the great sickening fear lest the doom which seemed to be slowly overshadowing them should claim him for its victim. He had done so much for her — and she loved him. There was a lump in her throat, and she could not eat.

When his back was turned, she slipped the greater portion of her supper into her pocket. Then she lay down with her head upon one of the rolled-up blankets, and watched him pile up the fire.

The place where they were camping was scarcely so open as that of the night before. There was more scrub about, and closer at hand. But it was the best they could find. They had struggled on and on until Myra had felt her feet give way beneath her, and had fallen, half-fainting, upon a little bank. The twilight was already settling down upon them, and in front, the country seemed even more broken up. So they had stayed there, and side by side they watched the stars steal into the deep violet sky, and the flames of their pine-wood fire leap up into the darkness, casting strange shadows upon the ground and across the bushes. Soon she fell asleep with a sort of effortless ease, born of her utter exhaustion of mind and body. And he, who dared not sleep, sat gaunt and hollow-eyed by her side,

his revolver across his knees, watching and listening. He had no count of time. There was nothing by which he could measure it, save by his own sensations, and by their record the hours that passed before midnight alone, were in themselves longer than any night he had ever known. His throat and his brain were alike burning, but he was still conscious of two strong feverish desires — one for water, or anything to moisten a little his burning thirst; the other, the deep desire to kill or take some terrible vengeance on the man who had come like a thief in the night, and first robbed and then mocked them.

So he sat there with strained eyes, watching and listening. All day long he had mounted every little eminence which they had passed, and with his hand shadowing his eyes had swept the horizon for some signs of their pursuers. He had seen nothing of them, and yet, now that night was come, and he sat there a lone figure on the vast desert, he felt instinctively that they were at hand. Every moment he expected to hear that demoniacal peal of mocking laughter, or some other and possibly more threatening token of their near presence. If only one of them would step for a moment out of their cowardly ambush — one single moment would be enough, for he had no fear of missing them. There is a despair which only nerves the hand and quickens the eye! It was so with him then!

Minute by minute, hour by hour, the night passed on his way. He sat with his eyes idly watching the flames which leaped up from his feet. To-night they seemed to be showing him little glimpses of his past days, of those wild, unsettled days of his later boyhood and early manhood. There was a girl's face looking up at him from the smouldering embers — a fair, proud face with the lips curled a little in a fine disdain, and the eyes mocking him. See, there she was, holding out a tiny white hand to him, with her

skirts gathered daintily in the other, and held back lest they should come too near to his soiled garments. What condescension, and what queenly, gracious beauty! How her voice had thrilled him in those days — him, the vagabond of the place, the incorrigible, the ne'er-do-well! He had not dared to think of her lately — but surely there was no harm now! He might allow himself this last sweet luxury! Would she ——

It had come at last. After hours of waiting and of deep, breathless quiet, the silence of the night was broken.

There was the flash of a revolver, and a loud report from behind a little line of scrub to the right of them — a report followed almost instantly by the hideous death-cry of an animal in torture. The Englishman leaped to his feet, maddened with rage. A few yards away, Peter, their faithful mule, lay gasping out his last breath. There was no further report. The death-cry of the animal was followed by a silence as intense and unbroken as the hours which had passed before. Bryan could contain himself no longer. He threw all prudence to the winds, and breaking from Myra's arms, he sprang across the open space, his great gaunt figure clearly defined in the leaping firelight.

"Come out, you miserable sneaks, you cowards!" he shouted. "Dan Cooper! Do you hear, Dan Cooper! Stand out like a man, I say, and show yourself!"

There was no answer. Reckless with passion, he fired twice into the shrubs from whence the shot had come. The reports echoed away again and again; then there was silence. He reached the shrubs themselves. There was no one there. Beyond was a gloomy wilderness. To go a step further was to offer himself an easy mark to any one who might be lurking beyond.

Two of his four cartridges were spent, wasted. He raised his hands to the skies and shouted a curse which leaped up

from his heart. Then he turned away and walked back to their camping-place.

Day broke, and with wan white faces they turned their backs upon the line of light in the east. There was little left for them to carry. The blankets they left behind — it was not worth while bringing them — and the remainder of their little stock of provisions went easily into his pocket. They started hand in hand, but they kept their faces averted. There was a writing even on his strong features which was like the writing of death.

As the sun grew hotter, they lay down under a little group of stunted trees. Here for the first time for many hours he dozed, and she watched, sitting by his side with his head upon her lap. Higher and higher the sun rose into a cloudless sky, and the heat grew more fierce. As noontime approached, she felt her tongue swell in her mouth, and several times her senses reeled. She laid his head tenderly down, stood up, and tried to swallow a morsel of food. It was useless! It stuck in her throat. Then, as she was sinking down again, some moving object far behind on the way by which they had come attracted her. She shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed steadily. Yes, they were distinctly in sight now: two men riding on mules, and each leading a spare one. She even saw the water-bottles on their backs, and the sight forced tears into her eyes.

She looked down at her companion. He was dozing feverishly, tossing about and muttering to himself.

"Now is the time," she said softly; "it may revive him. It is our one hope!"

She drew a small bottle from her pocket. It contained her last allowance of water, which, unseen by him, she had poured into a smaller phial and kept. She drew out the cock, and holding it carefully, stooped down.

"Wake up, Bryan!" she whispered.

He sat up dazed and stupefied. She held out the phial.

"Drink!" she said quietly.

He snatched it, and drank three-quarters of its contents at a gulp. Then his reason came back like a flash. He withdrew the flask from his mouth, and looked at her.

"You have let me drink it!" he said hoarsely. "You kept —— It was yours, and I have drunk it nearly all!"

"You wanted it more than I did!" she faltered.

He pressed the phial into her hand. She moistened her lips with a few drops of what was left. The sensation was the most exquisite she had ever known. Then she pointed away across the plain.

"See," she said, "there they are! Dan Cooper and the other — Skein!"

The Englishman crawled to his feet with a wild, grim look of satisfaction. He looked to the primings of his revolver.

"Let them come!" he muttered. "Ay, let them come! They may have water! Stoop down, Myra! Lie down in the shade! Let them get near!"

They lay flat on the ground, and waited. They waited until they heard the sound of mules' feet and men's voices close at hand. Then Bryan stood up, his revolver in his hand. Scarcely twenty paces away, were Dan Cooper and Skein riding leisurely along. At the sight of the gaunt, desperate figure rising up as it were out of the ground, they stopped short. Then, without a moment's hesitation, both men leaped from their mules, and crouched behind them.

Bryan lowered his revolver. "What have I done to you men," he cried, "that you should hunt me to death like a dog? Give me some water! You have it there in those bottles! Give me some water! We are dying of thirst!"

Dan Cooper rose slowly up from his ambush, and laughed. His evil face still showed the mark of the Englishman's fist.

"You may starve and rot like a dog for all the help I give you!" he cried. "What do you think I have followed you for? To help you? By God, no! I am here to watch you die!"

Bryan stepped forward, and raising his revolver unsteadily, fired. The mule that was between them staggered and sank down. But Dan Cooper rose up from behind, unhurt, with a wicked smile upon his lips, and unfaltering hand. The dying sun gleamed upon the barrel of his revolver, and his lips remained parted in that devil's smile. He saw that Bryan was on the verge of fainting — he had nothing to fear from him. Already he was swaying like a drunken man, and making vain efforts to steady his revolver. Dan Cooper took a leisurely aim, and fired. Too late Myra had sprung forward with a cry of horror, passionately striving to drag him away, to get between the two men. He was prone upon the ground with his sightless eyes turned to the deep blue sky, and the dark, thick drops of blood oozing slowly out from his chest. She threw herself down beside him in a wild abandonment of grief.

"Bryan, my love, speak to me! Say that you are not dead! Oh, my love! my love!"

There was no answer — no sign of any understanding. A ghastly pallor had crept into his face. He was white even to the cold lips which she was frantically kissing.

Suddenly she turned round upon her knees. Dan Cooper was calmly standing watching her, with his hands stuck through his belt.

"Young woman, I reckon you'd better have come with me at first!" he said. "I was bound to have you. I'd swore it! If you're ready now, we'll move on! There's better things than kissing dead men. Come!"

"Sooner down into hell!" she cried, facing him with blazing eyes. "You beast! You vile coward!"

He laughed softly. "We've got water and spirits, and plenty to eat. I guess you'll find us better company than your hulking Britisher!"

"I will starve before I touch your food," she cried fiercely. "If you come near me, I will kill you."

He laughed out loud. "Not tamed yet, my dainty beauty!" he sneered. "We'll give you a little longer, eh? We're both powerful anxious for your company, but we'll wait a bit! We ain't going to hurry you! We've plenty to drink, if you should happen to be thirsty! We'll look you up presently!"

He stooped down and undid the packages from the dead mule, fastening them on the other. Then he tramped away, and Skein followed him.

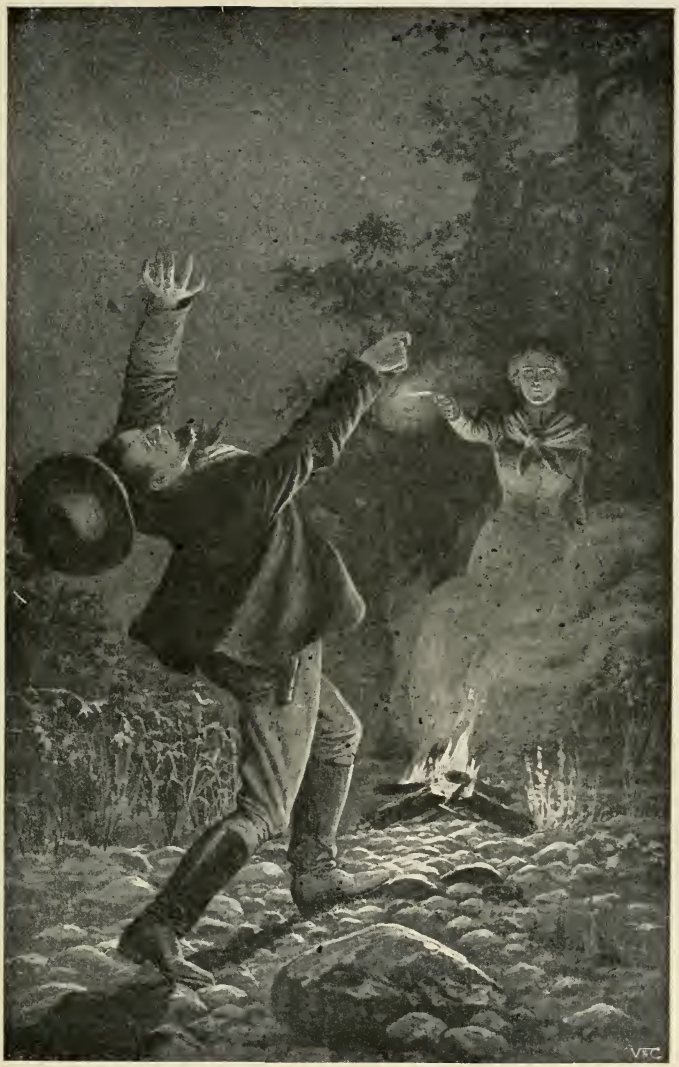
Once more, and for the last time in such fashion, the dusky night shadows stole down upon the two. She had collected a few logs and made a small fire. By its light she sat with her hands clasping his, and her great dark eyes, curiously distended, fixed upon the darkness. This night it was she who watched, and he who slept; only his sleep was like the sleep of death.

Night came down upon them with all its terrors, but she had passed fear. Once he had opened his eyes, and breathed out her name. She had moistened his lips with the last remains out of the tiny phial, and now there was nothing to do but to sit and wait, and watch.

Her time arrived. A dark figure came stealing along towards her, keeping in the shadows, and halting every now and then. She rose up softly with a curious smile upon her lips, and her hand in the bosom of her gown.

"Is that you, Dan Cooper?" she cried out softly.

He halted in his stealthy approach, and tried to stand still. He did not seem to be very steady upon his feet.



"The last shot from the Englishman's revolver had found its way into his heart."

"Ay! Are you still as proud as ever, eh? Are you tamed yet, my beauty? Are you thirsty, eh? How many kisses will you give me for a glass of water?"

"I am dying of thirst!" she moaned. "Bring me some water, and come to me!"

He laughed — a long, hideous laugh which seemed to find a hundred strange echoes as it rolled away across the plain.

"Ha, ha! You bid me come to you, you jade!" he cried exultingly. "I'm a better man than your d——d Britisher, after all! Ha! ha! I've got water and brandy too! We'll make a night of it — under the bushes across yonder."

He reeled into sight, and came across to her. She waited for him calmly.

"Let me hear it again!" he cried. "Let me hear you call me! Ha! ha! ha! I've been drinking, but I'm sober enough to kiss you, my little beauty! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Come quickly, Dan Cooper!" she cried. "I am waiting for you!"

"Waiting for me! Ha! ha! ha!"

He stepped into the broad circle of light, and the leaping flames cast a red, lurid glow upon his flushed face and wildly bright eyes. He was almost touching her now; his arms were already stretched out to take her into his clumsy embrace. Still she stood like a marble figure. Too late, he stopped short, sobered by that strange set look in her ashen face — too late, for her hand had stolen out from the bosom of her gown. There was a flash, a loud report, and with a curse which twisted his lips and left them apart for ever, Dan Cooper threw up his arms, and rolled over like a log. The last shot in the Englishman's revolver had found its way into his heart.

She stood perfectly still. The tigress-like gleam had not

died out from her eyes — there was not the least horror at what she had done. To her, it seemed indeed a very righteous act. Then as he did not move, she crossed over to his side, and took the water-bottle and brandy from his belt. She returned with them to the Englishman, and her face changed in a moment. She bent over him tenderly, and moistened his lips with the spirit, and even poured a few drops of water on his forehead. Then she took some herself, and lay down beside him.

There came a time, just as the first streak of dawn lightened the eastern sky, and the pale flame of her fire died out, when he opened his eyes. She bent close over him.

"My love!" she murmured. "We are alone! We shall die together! Kiss me!"

He kissed her feebly, and closed his eyes again. He was conscious, but he had no strength to speak. But his kiss had satisfied her. She was quite content. To die like this was no such hard thing for her. Along the stormy channels of her life, this was the one man who, in his rough way, had been kind and loyal to her. So she loved him — loved him, as her woman's instinct had told her, as he had never done her. If they had lived, she must have lost him. Some one else would have taken him away. So she looked death in the face and smiled! By his side, on his bosom, it seemed no evil thing!

With the dawn came Skein. He came like a jackal, stealing softly along with white face and trembling lips. Myra rose up and went to meet him with dauntless front.

"Fetch me the other mule and the stores!" she commanded, levelling the empty revolver at him. "I will come with you. Show me the way!"

He obeyed her, speechless with fear. He had seen Dan Cooper, white and dead, with his life-blood staining the

sandy turf on which he lay. He was a coward, and he obeyed her.

He brought her to where they had camped, some few hundred yards away, without a word passing between them. She took up the water-bottles and tins of food upon her shoulders, and she pointed westwards.

"Mount that mule, and ride on!" she commanded. "If you linger or return, I shall kill you!"

He made no answer, but he rode away. She watched him until he became a mere speck in the distance. Then she hurried back to Bryan, and threw herself down by his side.

"My love! my love!" she murmured. "There is no peace, nor any happiness in life! Death alone is sweet!"

She drew his lips to hers, and wound her arms around his body. And once more the night stole down and covered them with its shadows.

CHAPTER XIX

A PRINCE OF THE WEST

A MAN sat writing before a rosewood desk in a great dimly-lit chamber. A single green-shaded lamp burned at his left elbow, throwing a stream of light upon the papers before him, and upon his face. The rest of the room, high and finely proportioned, was wrapped in shadows, not so dense but that here and there the pale marble face of some exquisite piece of statuary shone dimly through the gloom, wearing in the dim half-light a strangely human expression. The hard polished wood floor, inlaid with imitation mosaic, was spread with magnificent rugs, and the ceiling, painted at the base with a wonderful imitation of Watteau's "Seasons," rose to a dome filled in at the summit with richly-stained glass. To all appearance it was a chamber in a palace.

Before him were all the modern appliances of a man keenly in touch with great affairs, either diplomatic or commercial. A table telephone stood at his right hand, with a polished silver mouthpiece. Under his foot was the knob of an electric bell; on his left hand a little array of speaking tubes, and a private telephone. Facing him was a little French clock.

The face of the man who sat there was such as his surroundings would seem to warrant — it was remarkable.

His complexion was fair, but his eyes were dark and brilliant. His features were hard, and cleanly chiseled. He wore neither beard nor moustache, and his mouth was small and cruel. He was of no more than the average height — if anything, less — carefully dressed in evening clothes, and he wore a small orchid in his buttonhole. It was impossible to form any estimate of his age from his appearance. There was none of the elasticity of youth about him, nor were there any of the usual indications of middle age. Of his condition it would be fair to assume from his appearance that he was a gentleman; the man himself remained effectually concealed behind a mask of perfectly impassive features.

He sat writing a letter — writing it at great pace, and yet with apparent ease. Suddenly there came a low, soft whistle from one of the speaking-tubes by his side. Without discontinuing his writing, he detached it from the hook, and held it to his ear.

"A woman to see you, sir! No name, important business!"

He turned his head slightly, and spoke down the tube.

"Impossible! I can see no one to-night! Send her to Arden, if she persists!"

He continued his letter. In a few moments there came another interruption. This time it came from the speaking tube nearest to him. He took it up.

"Well?"

"There is a woman here, whom you must see, sir!"

"Who is she?"

"I am not sure, sir, but I have her card!"

"What is the name, then?"

"There is no name, sir. There are three crosses on the card!"

The pen, with which he had never ceased to write, sud-

denly stopped short. One might almost have thought that the firm white fingers which held it trembled a little.

"Better bring her here yourself, Arden!" was the quiet answer. "You understand!"

"Yes, sir!"

He put the tube back on the hook, but he did not continue the letter. He touched a spring in the desk before him, and a long slab of dark wood sprang back, revealing an ill-taken, much-worn photograph of a woman, on a common tin plate. He looked at it steadily, and his lips moved.

"Not in vain, after all!" he murmured slowly to himself, with bright kindling eyes, and a curious tremor in his tone. "If it should be she, my cup is full! If it should be she!"

He touched the spring, and the photograph was hidden again. He recommenced writing, and his features recovered their mask of stern repose. He heard the heavy door open and close behind him without looking up. Soft footsteps came towards him across the floor, swiftly at first, then hesitatingly. At last they stopped. Then he turned slowly round.

A woman was standing only a few yards behind his chair — a woman plainly dressed in black clothes, and wearing a heavy gauze veil which she had not raised. For one moment the unruly blood coursed like fire through all his veins, and his heart gave a great throb. Then he set his teeth, and ground his heel into the floor beneath him. He was himself again, calm, cold, and deliberate.

"You wished to speak to me?" he said. "I am Amies Rutten!"

"Yes!"

He rose to his feet, and pushed a lounge towards her with a mute, courteous gesture. She did not accept it.

"I have come to you with a message from a dead man!" she continued.

He bowed. "So Jim is dead, is he?"

She bent her head, and started a little. She had imagined herself unrecognized.

"He died at the Blue River diggings!"

"May I ask from whom you have heard this?"

"I was there myself!" she answered. "I was with him when he died!"

"You were with him yourself," he repeated slowly — "with him when he died at the Blue River diggings?"

"Yes!"

"Pardon me, you did not go with him! You were in San Francisco months after he had left!"

She looked at him intently.

"That is true!" she answered. "It is also true that I was with him there when he died!"

"May I ask — the cause of his death?"

"He was shot!"

"Shot!" He repeated the word without any affectation of horror. He did not even seem surprised.

"A row, I suppose?" he remarked.

She shook her head. "He was murdered by a stranger who came to the diggings to rob him of some papers. I was in time to prevent the robbery, but not the murder. As I told you, I was with him when he died. I have a message for you!"

"For me?"

"Yes, for you! You have papers of his. You are to give them to me! I put three crosses on a card. He said you would understand!"

"Yes, I understand. What are you going to do with the papers?"

"That is — my own affair!"

"Exactly! I beg your pardon! He gave you some, I suppose?"

"Yes!"

"And told you that I had the rest?"

"Yes!"

There was a short silence. They were alone in the great room, but when he spoke again, he dropped his voice.

"It is quite true! I have the papers! Do you know the secret?"

"Not yet! I have not examined them!"

"Do you know how to use them?"

"Yes!"

"You are going to take them to Europe?"

"Probably!"

"And stay there, perhaps?"

"Very likely! Give me the papers, please. I want to go!"

"Don't be impatient, Myra! You have been ill?"

"Yes! I have been ill!"

"Poor little girl!"

His tone was suddenly as soft as a woman's, and almost caressing. She shivered at the sound of it.

"Amies Rutten, give me my papers, and let me go!"

"Let you go!" he repeated softly. "Let you go! How can I?"

A sudden change, a metamorphosis, came over the man. The hardness fell from his face, a passionate light shone in his eyes, and his lips quivered as the words leaped from him. His voice had become wonderfully sweet.

"Let you go, Myra! Ah, my love, how can you ask me that? Do you know that I have had the city searched for you, street by street, house by house? Do you know that in the midst of my great prosperity, I have sat here all night alone — thinking of you; unable to sleep or rest, or gain any peace — thinking always of you? And in the daytime, when I have been gambling for millions at the Exchange

in the Council Room, your face has been always with me, smiling when fate smiled on me, frowning when the tide turned! See! Do you know that?"

He stepped back and touched the knob in his desk. The spring flew back. He held up the lamp, and she looked into her own face.

"I gave your husband a thousand dollars for that!" he said quietly. "He would have sold you for as much more, if he had been able!"

She shuddered. "I did not come here for this!" she cried. "Give me what belongs to me, and let me go!"

"You shall have all that belongs to you — and all that belongs to me!" he exclaimed, his deep bass tones quivering with pent-up emotion. "See!"

He stepped back to the wall, and touched a little black ebony key. Softly-burning electric lights suddenly glowed from the walls and from the ceiling. The magnificence of the room in which they were was revealed as though by magic, with all its treasures of art and luxury of appointment. She looked around, and was startled into a little cry of wonder. Then her eyes fell upon him, standing before her, perfectly dressed, calm and debonair, and with that curious air of strength and power which lurked behind his strong set features — the evident master of his surroundings. She half-closed her eyes, and turned abruptly away. She had not feared an awful death in the lonely desert; she had passed through many dangers with a bold front, and unshaken heart; but this man she feared. She always had done so! The gleam of his dark eyes, the *timbre* of his calm, even voice stirred her as nothing else in the world could do.

"Myra, whilst you have been seeing the last of that scoundrel Huntly, I have been making a mighty fortune! It came to me in one day — the idea of the thing! I staked all I had — all I could lay my hands upon, and I won! To-

day, I am the richest man in San Francisco — one of the richest in the States. Do you know why I am here — why I have not left for Europe, to commence the enjoyment of my wealth? It is because I have been waiting for you, Myra! Every man in the world has his weak point! You are mine, Myra! I love you as no one else could ever love you. Come to me now, and I will make you the most envied woman in the world. There are no limits to my wealth! I can buy you a Queen's jewels. Wealth is power in the old world as well as in the new. You shall ask for nothing in vain! It is only dear to me, Myra, that I may share it with you. I will show you a new life. I will teach you many new things! I have no ties, no further interest in any business. I will take you to Italy, to Greece, to all the beautiful countries in the world. I will show you —— "

"Stop!"

There was a ring in her voice which checked him in the full flow of his eloquence. His hands dropped to his side, and the glow faded from his face. He listened to her with all the old impenetrability of expression.

She lifted her veil, and showed him more distinctly than he had yet seen it, her worn, sad face. Then she spoke to him slowly, but with an intense, penetrating distinctness.

"I have listened to all you have said! I would not come to you, Amies Rutten, though my life were to be the penalty. I hate you! My husband was a bad man, but you made him worse. You made him your tool; he did for you the work which you were ashamed to do, and when you had dragged him down as low as a man can lie, when he was your creature, body and soul, you tried to buy me from him!"

An angry spot was burning upon her cheeks, and her eyes were flashing with scorn and anger. The memory of those hideous days had risen up within her, and with it, all the

intolerable loathing which she had felt for this man. He looked into her face, and silently he ground his teeth.

"It was because I loved you, that I wanted to take you away!" he cried in a low, passionate voice. "That man was treating you like a brute! You may have been his wife. He treated you worse than any mistress whom he had taken from the streets! Good God! do you blame me that I tried to take you away? Think of those days, and ask yourself that!"

"Let the past be, Amies Rutten!" she said. "He is dead, and I have forgiven him! Give me my papers, and let me go! There can never be anything between you and me!"

He stood perfectly still for a moment or two, and when she looked at him, wondering at his silence, she was afraid.

He spoke to her at last. No matter what he was going to say, it was a relief to her to hear him speak.

"You are wrong, Myra!" he said slowly. "There will be something between us, so surely as I, Amies Rutten, speak the words! There is no power in this world shall keep you from me! You may struggle a little while! Never mind! My time will surely come! You are poor! You will become poorer! I shall see to it! Wealth will taste all the sweeter presently. What was it you were asking for — papers? I have no papers!"

She drew a pencil and card from her pocket, and wrote the words which the dying man had whispered into her ear. He grew a shade paler as he read them, but he did not hesitate. He tore the card into pieces, and scattered them at her feet.

"I am above all danger from such a source as this!" he said calmly. "If I were not, I should not hesitate! I should do what I have done! I will give you nothing until you come to me! Nothing!"

He hesitated for a moment. When he continued, his deep tone was tremulous with emotion, and the passion had leaped once more into his face.

"Is it worth while, Myra, my love; is it worth while to face suffering, and poverty, and shame; to endure them all, for the sake of a hopeless struggle? Every day will bring you nearer to me! In the end you will be mine! It is your destiny! Do you think that you can match your single will against mine — mine backed by endless wealth and unflagging energy? When you leave here to-night, my spies will follow you; where you are living, and with whom, will be known to me! Every effort you make to get away, I shall easily find out and thwart. Myra, is it worth while?" he continued, a wonderful tenderness stealing into his tone as he leaned over towards her. "We could leave for Europe at once, on Saturday if you like. I will be your slave! You shall command, and I will obey. Say but one word, Myra, and a few strokes of my pen," he pointed to the open desk, "shall make you rich for life — as rich as any woman in San Francisco! You have lived all your days amongst the shadows, you know nothing of the beautiful side of life! I will show it to you! You do not care for me. Well, I know it! But it is because you do not know me! You have thought of me only as the associate of such men as Huntly! I will show you the other and the better side of myself. I will show you other worlds into which I have the entry, the worlds of art, and music, and poetry, which I have always loved in secret, and which I will teach you to love too. I will make your life one long dream of pleasure; pleasure, poor child, which you have never dreamed of. You shall forget all your sufferings, all the miserable humiliation of your life with that scoundrel who blackened your young days. You shall be born again into a new world, a world of culture and refinement, and a perfect happiness. I promise

you this, Myra, and I will keep my word unto the uttermost letter!"

She had listened to him with averted head, and she had dropped her veil, so that he was not able to gather in any way from her face what impression his words had made upon her. But when he had finished, she looked up, and he knew at once.

"You will not give me the papers, then?" she said.

"I will not!" he answered, looking away that she might not see how bitterly disappointed he was. "I will give you the papers, and a fortune of ten times their value, when you come to me! But it must be all or nothing!"

She turned away, and walked towards the door. He touched a bell, and a servant met her there. She did not look round or speak to him again.

He took up one of the speaking-tubes, and spoke into it.

"The girl who has just left me is to be followed home and watched!" he said. "Jameson and Ardell had better take the matter in hand. See that I have a full report every few hours!"

Then he sat down at his desk, and drew his papers towards him. But he did not write any more.

CHAPTER XX

MAN THE BRUTE AND WOMAN THE ANGEL

"At last, Myra! Was the man away, or dead, or what? Give me a drink! I'm parched!"

The Englishman half-raised himself from a shabby little couch which groaned and creaked with his weight, and held out his hand to her. His cheeks were blanched and thin, and his eyes were unnaturally bright. The fever through which he had passed had played strange havoc with him.

She stood still for a moment to recover her breath; she had run up seven flights of steep stairs without a pause. Then she threw her hat on to the table, and poured him out some lemonade from a jug.

"Has it seemed very long?" she said softly. "I am sorry! I had to walk back, and it was a long way!"

He drained the cup and set it down. Then he drew a long breath, and looked fixedly at her.

"Well?" he said.

She knelt down by his side, and leant her head upon his pillow.

"I have failed!" she whispered huskily. "He would not give them to me!"

"He would not give them to you!" the Englishman faltered. "Has he got them? Did he say that he had them?"

"Yes, he has them!"

"Did he say so?"

"Yes!"

"Then why will he not give them up? Does he want money?"

She shook her head.

"He is as rich as a prince now. He has no need of money!"

"Then why won't he give them up — why won't he? Have you forgotten anything that Jim told you to say to him, eh?"

His face and even his limbs were shaking with the excitement which he was too weak to bear. His long, thin fingers were clutched around her wrist, and his bright eyes were fastened upon her.

"I remembered everything! It was not that!"

"Go on! go on!" he muttered.

"Bryan," she whispered, burying her face in the pillow by his side, "do you remember — I told you about the man, and how he persecuted me in the days when Jim and he were together so much? Do you remember?"

"Ay, something of it! Go on!"

"He — he has not forgotten! He has been searching for me everywhere! He — oh, don't you understand?"

"No, I'm d——d if I do!" the Englishman answered peevishly. "Speak out, do!"

She drew a little breath between her teeth, and looked at him with white face, but without flinching.

"He wants me to go and live with him! That is the price of those papers!"

"Ah!"

The eager light died suddenly out from his face. He sank back on the couch, pale almost to the lips, and with half-closed eyes. She looked at him for a moment in alarm, and

then ran hastily across the room to a cupboard, and poured out a few drops of brandy into a glass.

"Bryan," she whispered, bending over him. "Oh, don't! You mustn't faint, dear! Remember what the doctor said!"

She forced the brandy between his lips, and kissed them. He shivered and opened his eyes.

"I'm — all right!" he muttered. "It's so stewing hot up here. Open the window higher, Myra!"

She pushed it up a few more inches, but there seemed to be scarcely a breath of air. From the narrow street below came the murmur of a strange babel of tongues, reaching them, however, but faintly. Away as far as the eye could see, flared up to the sky the lights from the great city of pleasure.

"Bryan, after I left him," she whispered, "I went to José's Café, and saw the man whom Jim told me to see. I told him the whole story. He made me repeat it twice, and then he sent me away without a word. But, Bryan, I am afraid that Amies Rutten is far above the power of these men now. They won't be able to touch him!"

"I will go to him myself!" the Englishman muttered. "The papers belong to me! I will make him give them up!"

She shook her head.

"It would not be a bit of use!" she said sadly. "If he knew that it was for you I wanted them, he would throw them on the fire!"

He looked away out of the open window. He had been very ill, and the fever which had brought him to the brink of death had left him very low and weak. Just then he felt that it would be rather a relief to die.

"I came here — to get those papers!" he said slowly. "I vowed that I would get them! Well, I have failed! I may as well die! I'd just as lief! I'm only a burden to you,

you're starving yourself for my sake! I'm not worth it! Better let me die, Myra — much better!"

Her eyes filled with tears. Watching her, he could see more clearly than ever how thin and white she was. Her black gown shone with wear, and was mended in many places. The roundness had gone from her form, and the fire from her eyes. It was odd that she remained so beautiful. He looked around the little room. It was bare and empty — utterly poverty-stricken. Everything had been given to keep him alive — her few trinkets, her oddments of finery, even some dainty little treasures of fine linen, which had been her single luxury. His brows contracted into a frown.

"Myra, why don't you let me die?" he said fretfully. "I'd just as soon! I shall never see England again now! I don't want to be a burden upon you like this!"

She bent over him, sad but dry-eyed. All that she had done for him was as nothing to her; would have seemed infinitely less than nothing if only he had known how to repay her. Her eyes met his wistfully. Would it have been so great a sacrifice for him to have drawn her down and kissed her just once; to have pressed her hand, and to have suffered just one note of tenderness to have crept into his tone? Her record of the last few weeks had been one long course of martyrdom for his sake. For his sake she had looked death in the face. For his sake Dan Cooper had lain dead with his sightless eyes turned to heaven, slain by her hand. It was the last extremity of self-defence — but the thing pressed on her heart, and at night-time his cold, white face and glazed eyes had stolen to her side out of the shadows of many a nightmare. She would never be quite able to forget that her hand had taken human life, although the burden would seem less to her since it was for his sake that she bore it. And in the rude wagons of the gold-seekers from Christopher's Creek who had rescued them,

and brought them to San Francisco, she had sat from sunrise to sunset with his head in her lap, watching him and ministering to the wants of his fever. Those days and the days which followed left their mark for ever upon her life. They had reached the city one morning, and she had brought him to these rooms which she herself had once occupied, and had collected the few remnants of her little stock of furniture, doing her best to make the place habitable. The fever was followed by a lethargy almost as wearing. She had no money, and the gold which he had brought from the Blue River had been lost in the desert. One by one her little stock of possessions had gone to keep him in food, and pay the doctor. Of her few trinkets, she had not one left; three days ago she had sold the wedding-ring which Maurice Huntly had placed upon her finger. Even her gowns had gone! She had only the one she stood upright in. And all the time she had not breathed a word to him of the straits in which they were. Her one thought had been of him, and her one prayer for his life! She had saved it! — saved it for what, and for whom?

He was by no means a bad man. He had many good qualities, and the instincts which belong to them; and in the days which came afterwards, he suffered many times and deeply when he reviewed his conduct at this time. For without doubt, he was both callous and brutally selfish. The peevishness of the invalid had transformed him. The sense of his reliance upon her fretted and worried him. He would rather have been left to die in the desert than owe so much to her. A sort of sullenness came over him. He had not uttered a single word of thanks, not a single grateful sentence. Her loving care, the sufferings and privations which she had borne, went for nothing with him. In his sleep he had raved for the papers, and for his sake she had gone to the man whom she both feared and loathed, seeking

to obtain them for him. In vain, too, had been this last service. Not even by a single look had he shown her any measure of gratitude.

The night wore on, and the lights of the great city flared up into the dark sky. He had fallen into a troubled slumber, and she was on her knees by his side, gazing with rapt face but unseeing eyes out of the wide-open window. The harsh clanging of the engine bells as the cars wound their way across the maze of streets into the heart of the city, and the rattle of the serpent-like trains sweeping along the overhead railway, were unheard. She saw nothing and heard nothing. She thought only of herself and him, two lone figures in the dark tragedy of her young life. In his indifference she seemed to read the hopelessness of her fate. It had been her last sweet hope, her only salvation; and it was gone. In the calm brooding silence of the later night, she saw as it were, written in letters of fire across the dark sky, the cruel and hopeless record of these last days. He was weary of her! Even her mere presence fretted and disturbed him. He was ashamed of the days that had been; ashamed to owe her this return into the world from amongst the very shadows of death. It was so! She could not alter it, the very snapping of her heart-strings could not make it any different. In this moment of acute and agonizing realization, out of the great despair which swept in upon her, was born that first glimmering suggestion of her supreme immolation. All through the night it grew and grew in her heart, bringing her in a measure some sense of strange relief, although when she suffered her thoughts to dwell for a moment upon it her brain reeled, and her whole physical system rebelled with a great sense of shuddering recoil. But when dawn came, it lived!

CHAPTER XXI

THE OFFERING OF A SOUL

On the seventh day after her first visit to him, Myra stood once more in Amies Rutten's library. She had found it empty; he was at dinner with some friends, the servant told her, and she would probably have to wait for an hour. But in less than five minutes he pushed aside the curtains and entered the room; his pale face flushed a little, perhaps with wine, or was it with the triumph of her visit?

He walked calmly across the great room, banishing all traces of expectation from his face, as self-possessed and impassive in manner as he was immaculate in the white shirt-front and plain gold stud of his evening dress. He placed a chair for her, and greeted her kindly, choosing to ignore altogether the dumb misery stamped into her white face.

"You have come to see me, then, Myra," he said. "That's well!"

"Yes, I have come," she answered. "I do not want to talk much. I am tired."

"You look it," he answered pityingly. "Wait a moment."

He unlocked a cabinet, and poured out a glass of rich ruby-coloured wine. Then he brought it to her, and after a moment's hesitation she accepted and drank it. It ran

through her veins like lightning, and brought even a faint flush into her cheeks.

"Poor child!" he said softly. "Myra, why did you set yourself against me? Sooner or later I was bound to win. Now tell me; you have a proposition to make."

She bowed her head. "Yes."

"Well, don't hurry about it. My time is my own. I have told my friends that I may be engaged for some time."

"Thank you. I am a little faint. It was hot, waiting. I will rest for a minute."

She half closed her eyes, and he watched her steadily for a few seconds. He understood too well the meaning of those sunken cheeks, and the dark rims under her eyes. It was not only mental suffering that had worked this havoc, it was hunger, starvation. He crossed to one of the speaking-tubes, and whispered a few sentences down it. When she opened her eyes, there was a small table by her side, spread with a white cloth, a silver dish of oysters, some pâté, fruit, and a bottle of gold-foiled wine, a glass of which was already poured out.

"You were fond of oysters once, Myra!" he said, coming over to her. "Take some; you need food."

She shrank back, and covered her face with her hands. But he insisted quietly, and in the end she yielded. After all, if this thing was to be, she might just as well eat his food and drink his wine. She ate, the first time for twenty-four hours, and took a few sips of the wine. Then she called to him; he had walked across to his desk, and was sitting there, writing, or pretending to write.

He came to her at once.

"I am here, Myra," he said.

She stood up — stood away from the table, and as near as possible to the lamp.

"I want you to look at me!" she said, in a dull, me-

chanical tone. "I want you to see me exactly as I am. I am thin — thinner than I have ever been in my life. Look at my face! I have lost my beauty! I am just a wreck, and I never expect to be anything better. Do you still want me?"

"More than ever!" he answered quietly. "More than ever, that I may show you a life which knows no privations, and no unhappiness."

"Let me go right on, please!" she said slowly. "I dislike you more than any living man. I think that I hate you! The touch of your fingers would make me shudder now, as it has done before! You understand that! Do you still want me?"

"More than ever!" he answered, in the same tone. "I shall show you that I am not the man you think I am! I do not blame you for hating me now! I shall teach you to love me!"

"I never could! Never! never!"

"That is my risk!" he answered. "I am content!"

She drew her hands together and shivered, half-closing her eyes. For a full minute there was silence between them. Then she spoke again, and her voice had an odd far-away sound in it.

"I am willing to come to you!" she said. "There is a condition. You must hear it first!"

He turned his head away. He did not wish her to see the sudden glow of passion which had transformed his cold, set face.

"I am listening!" he said.

"I want you to give the papers now — to-night; and some money. I will come to you to-morrow!"

His face darkened. He had no fear of her not keeping her word, but he had a particular reluctance to letting her go. He knew with whom she was sharing her room, and

the thought was like fire in his brain. She wanted to go back to him! It was but for a single night, and yet — curse him!

"You do not care to trust me?" she asked.

He did not answer her immediately. He walked to his desk, and, unlocking a drawer, took out a little pile of bills. Then he took a sealed packet from the same place, and thrust them all into her hands.

"I am not afraid to trust you, Myra!" he said gravely. "Good night!"

She gave him her hand with a little shiver, which he affected not to notice.

"Good night!" she answered. "I — I shall be here to-morrow!"

"One moment, Myra!" he said slowly. "I am afraid that you find this very terrible to look forward to! You do not love me — and there is some one else whom you do love! The money and the papers are, I presume, for him. He is welcome to them!"

There was a ring of fine scorn in his tone. Myra's eyes fell before his.

"That is nothing!" he continued. "All that I want to say is this, Myra; I love you, and as surely as I have drawn you into my arms, so surely will I make you happy there! Try and believe that! Now, good night! You will find a carriage waiting for you at the door!"

She let down her veil, and passed out without a word, following the servant whom he had summoned. And Amies Rutten went back to his guests with a quiet smile upon his lips, and a curiously bright light in his gray-blue eyes.

"At last, Myra! Great Heavens, what a time you have been!"

She laid down her hat upon the table, and looked at him.

Directly their eyes met he knew that something had happened. The handwriting of tragedy was in her pale face and gleaming eyes.

"Has it seemed long?" she said absently. "I did not think that you would notice!"

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"No matter! Tell me! You want to go back to England, don't you?"

He turned his face away from her, and looked across the great shadowy gulf of the city, with its blaze of lights. Beyond was the sea. His eyes caught the gleam of the harbour lights flashing upon its dark bosom, and he sighed.

"Don't mind telling me, Bryan!" she said. "You want to go, don't you?"

He turned round.

"God knows I do!" he answered. "I am dying here!"

Her heart beat quickly. In the unlit room he could see her bosom rising and falling underneath her thin, threadbare dress, and her dark eyes wet with tears. She tried to speak, but a great lump was in her throat.

He had more to say now that the ice was broken.

"I am only a wretched, miserable burden to you here, Myra! If only I could find the money to go home, I might live! I have given up all hopes of the papers. I only want to get away from this cruel, awful place. The very air here chokes me! And to think that I am living on you all this time! If I could only get to England, I could work, and send you out some money! You've been a real brick to me, Myra! I ——"

"Stop!"

His flow of eloquence was suddenly checked by that quick staccato cry—the cry of a woman whose heart-strings are being roughly handled. He looked up at her in surprise. Her face was convulsed with pain.

"I do not want money! I shall not want it any more! Here are your papers, and here is the money to go home with!"

She flung them upon the table before him. He looked at them, and then at her. In a dim, vague sort of way he began to understand. He leaned on the back of the chair, and looked at her.

"You are going to him!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Well?"

She flung the challenge across at him. Her eyes were bright and dry; now and then there was a scarlet glow in her cheeks.

"Well, what would you have me do? You are going away! It doesn't much matter, does it? There are the papers for which you came here, and there is money sufficient to take you home!"

He could not keep the light from his eyes as he looked at them, but as yet he had not taken them up. His face was troubled. He had an uneasy feeling in his heart. He was irresolute! He did not understand. He was not capable of it! Between him and her was fixed a mighty gulf. She, the offspring of a western lumberman who had married the daughter of a small farmer, the pioneers of a new race upon a new soil, had inherited in some mysterious way a leaven of all that is sweetest and greatest and best in womankind. She had given her love to this man, had loved him to the extent of a glorious self-immolation beyond any possible understanding of his. Far below on the plane of humanity, he looked up at her, uneasy, yet wholly incapable of appreciating this sacrifice of herself which she was offering to him. With the eyes that she saw, he could not see, and the pains which rent her heart, he could not suffer. In the days to come, before he and she should meet again in a larger world, some knowledge of these things had dawned upon

him. There were days when the memory of these few moments in the little dark chamber high up amongst the slums of San Francisco was an exquisite torture to him — when her calm, white face seemed to haunt him like an everlasting reproach, and the shame of her sacrifice sank into his very soul. But that was when he too had been quickened into a larger life and understanding, when he had become a man of his generation, a creature of Nature's great system of education. To-night, he realized none of these things.

"I do not quite understand!" he said. "Only a few days ago, you shuddered at the mention of this man's name!"

She laughed. The echoes of that laugh, too, lingered with him. There were days to come when the memory of it should be like a keen torture.

"Ah, that was when you were ill and helpless — before you had become homesick! I have changed! Amies Rutten is well enough, and he has the wealth of a prince! Go and get your ticket before the office closes!"

She held out a handful of the notes. Still he hesitated.

"I don't like touching his money!" he muttered.

"It is not his!" she answered. "It is mine!"

He raised his hand, and their fingers touched for a moment as he took the notes. Hers were deathly cold, but he did not seem to notice. He left her, and hurried out without a word.

He walked swiftly through the brilliantly-lit streets on his way to the ticket-office. His weakness was all forgotten! He had money in his hand, and the papers which had been the desire of his life, in his pocket. His cheeks were flushed with joy, and his eyes were bright. And in that little lone room high up above the roar of the great city, a woman lay, face downwards upon the floor, dry-eyed, but moaning

softly like some beautiful wild creature whose life-blood is ebbing slowly away.

He took a ticket to New York, and booked a Cunard passage to Liverpool at the same office. Then he bought food and wine — Myra and he should have their last little supper together! But, when he got back, the little room where they had lived together was empty. She had gone!

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

IN THE OLD WORLD

The afternoon sun was streaming through the latticed window of an old-fashioned West of England farmhouse, throwing strange gleams of light into the quaint old corners, and across the red-tiled floor.

Leaning back in a chintz-covered old easy-chair drawn out from the corner was Bryan. His cap and stick were upon the table, and his hair was rough and wind-tossed. He had just come in from a long walk.

A little gray-haired woman — the picture of neat old age — came across the floor to him from the other end of the room. She stopped when she saw the dark cloud upon his face, and the weary look in his eyes.

"You're over-tired, sir!" she said reproachfully. "You'll have some tea, won't you?"

Bryan looked up suddenly. He had been deep in thought.

"Ay, Mrs. Holmes, I will!" he answered. "Some tea, and something to eat. I'm starved!"

"Why, surely, sir, and that you shall!" she exclaimed. "Jane! Jane!"

She bustled away in search of her little domestic. Just

as she turned her back, a shadow darkened the window for a moment, and immediately afterwards there was a sharp tapping at the door. Bryan looked round.

"Open the door, Mrs. Holmes!" he said. "Some one knocking!"

"It'll be the baker!" she remarked, hurrying back and raising the latch. "Sakes alive! it's my Lady!" she exclaimed, in an altogether different key. "Do walk in, my Lady Helen! You'll take a chair! Deary me, I'm right glad to see you looking so fine and well! Deary me!"

A tall, slim girl dressed in a plain riding-habit, and holding her whip and skirts in her left hand, stepped lightly in.

"I'll take something more than a chair, Mrs. Holmes!" she said, with a little laugh. "I want a cup of your very best tea, and some bread and butter! I'm positively starved! John was to have met me at Welby Gorse with my sandwich-case, but I missed him somehow, and I've had nothing all day! Oh!"

She had suddenly seen Bryan. He rose up from his seat in the chimney-corner, and stood upright, so that his head nearly touched the old beam which crossed the ceiling. Her eyes rested at first upon him carelessly — then with a faint expression of surprise. She stood quite still, tapping her skirts with her whip, and with a slight frown upon her clear white forehead. As for him, a deep flush had stolen through the bronze sunburn of his cheeks, mounting even to his brow. There was a new look in his face, and a new fire in his eyes.

Mrs. Holmes hastened to explain his presence.

"It's a gentleman lodging with me for a few days, my Lady!" she said apologetically. "I'll see for the tea! You'll take a chair!"

She bustled away into the back regions. Bryan mechanically wheeled out his chair, and placed it for her.

"So you have come back again!" she remarked, with a little smile. "Why, I thought that you had gone to the Cape, or Australia, or somewhere, to make your fortune! You have soon tired of wandering!"

"I'm very tired of it!" he answered. "I am glad to be back in England again!"

She took his chair, and laid her whip upon the table by the side of his stick. He remained standing before her. From the kitchen behind came the pleasant rattle of cups and saucers, and the hissing of a kettle. Neither of them spoke for several moments. A faint ray of winter sunlight was glancing upon the oak table, and upon her fair hair, resolutely brushed back, but waving a little round the temples. She leaned back and watched him, smoothing out her gloves thoughtfully.

"Well, tell me all about it!" she said at length. "Where have you been?"

"In California and San Francisco, most of the time!" he answered. "Digging for gold, amongst other things!"

"Were you successful?" she asked.

"In a measure! I was there on a different sort of search, too. I had a rough time of it altogether!"

She looked at him critically.

"Ah! a search for a name and a fortune, wasn't it? I remember your telling me something about it, don't I? Well, did you find them?"

"I think so!" he answered slowly. "One of them, at any rate!"

A peculiar gravity in his tone attracted her. She raised her eyes to his face again, and looked at him with a quiet, supercilious interest.

"Really, how interesting! Might one inquire which?"

"No; you mayn't!" he answered roughly. "Don't make me mad, Lady Helen! When you look at me like

that, I don't feel quite myself. What have I done that you should despise me so?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and leaned back in the chair, half-closing her eyes.

"Dear me!" she said softly. "I did hope that you had forgotten those terrible heroics of yours!"

His chest heaved, and there was a strange bright light in his eyes.

"Forgotten! I have forgotten nothing — nothing, curse it!" he muttered under his breath. "I have been a rank utter fool from the day I flung myself upon your horses; and you deigned to thank me with a smile. God! how the memory of that day has clung to me! I thought of it at night, on the steamer, when the deep silence and the loneliness of the sea brought it all back, and even the rushing winds seemed to speak to me with your voice! And in the darkness, when I sat and smoked my pipe outside my hut on the banks of the Blue River, there was something about the scent of the shrubs there which reminded me of the perfume of your clothes. Once I was as near death as a man can come — so near that my eyes were closed, and the death burr was in my ears; I was thinking of you then! I couldn't keep you out of my thoughts! I never can! God knows I try! Oh, you make me wish that I could hate you when I see you looking as you do now, as calm, and proud, and disdainful as though the breaking of a man's heart were nothing to you!"

"The breaking of some men's hearts, if they really possess such a thing, would be a great deal to me in some cases," she said, looking at him steadfastly. "But you must really excuse me if I wonder sometimes whether you quite realize to whom you are talking!"

He laughed hoarsely. "Ay, I know! You are Lady Helen Wessemer, niece and ward of the Earl of Wessemer,

and I am — well, nobody! That's so! I know it well enough, but there are times when I can only remember that I am a man, and you are a woman."

"You are certainly the boldest man I ever met!" she said, with a slight flush in her cheeks. "I can see that you are excited, and scarcely accountable for what you are saying, or I should take care not to see you or speak to you again! I don't want to do that, if only you would control yourself, and be reasonable. It would be so much better! Now, listen! Four or five years ago, you saved my life — saved it bravely, too! What were you then? Try and recall yourself! You were the terror of the whole village. A notorious poacher, a frequenter of public-houses, ill-dressed and ill-mannered, and associated only with the worst characters about the place! Why Lord Wessemer passed over all your misdeeds, and persistently refused to have you punished, I cannot imagine; but it was so! You were a completely lawless creature; you earned no money; you never worked; you slept out of doors — in short, you were half a wild animal!"

"Exactly!"

She leaned forward to the fire, and held her fingers to the blaze for a few moments. Then she continued, keeping her eyes steadily fixed upon him.

"Well, after my accident and your bravery, I naturally felt some anxiety to serve you; and I gave you what you most needed — good advice. It pleased you to follow it! What I suggested, you did. You commenced to lead a decent life, and, to my surprise, I found that you were very fairly educated. In a very few months you were vastly improved. You had a very fair amount of money for your position, and Lord Wessemer would have let you have any of his farms rent-free. It was then that your gratitude to me commenced to take — an objectionable form. You

followed me about, you glared at me if you saw me at any time with the men who were the natural companions of my position — in short, you behaved like a thorough idiot. You began to talk wildly, too, of some possible good fortune which might happen to you, and, in short, you wearied me horribly. At last you went away, and don't feel hurt if I say it was a great relief. You see you have forced me to be very frank! I want to continue to be your friend, but if I do, you must remember this: that I am Lady Helen Wessemer, and you are — yourself. You understand! Don't, please, look so tragical! Is Mrs. Holmes ever going to bring that tea, I wonder!"

"One moment!"

He was standing over her, stern and pale. She half rose, but sat down again. There was a certain strength in the man — in his resolute face and set brows — which it was hard to resist.

"Suppose for one moment, that I was a gentleman, and rich — richer even than you! What then?"

"Nothing!"

"You mean ——"

"I mean that you would be to me then — what you are now!" she interrupted. "Don't you understand? You have no real education, no culture! You and I dwell in different worlds! You force me to tell you this! I am sorry to hurt you, but nothing in this world could make — what you suggest possible!"

He clenched his fists tightly together, and drew himself up so that his head touched the roof. His face was white and desperate, and his eyes glowed like pieces of live coal. She shrank back in her chair, and looked at him — afraid.

"It's — not true!" he said, in a tone quite low, but vibrating with passion. "Lady Helen, the time will come when you shall take back your words. Look at me! I'm a

strong man. I'm one of those who gets what he wants! I want you — you and your love! And I shall have you! I swear it before God — on my soul!"

She shrank away from him, for once speechless. He caught his cap and stick from the table, and strode across the stone floor. The door opened and shut. He was gone!

"He is mad!" she told herself. "He must be out of his senses!"

CHAPTER II

THE JUDGMENT OF FORTUNE

Bryan left the farmyard by the gate in the ordinary way, but once in the fields, he strode along regardless of footpaths or stiles, with the set, white face of a man suddenly bereft of his senses. As a matter of fact, he was utterly without knowledge of where he was going to, but he kept his face resolutely turned towards the setting sun, and in about half an hour he had reached a slight elevation of the country from which a lonely tract of moorland rolled away to the horizon. Here he paused, and stood with tightly-clenched hands, gazing away at the far-distant line where the winter's sun seemed sinking into the bosom of the earth. For a moment his face worked spasmodically. Then he commenced to mutter to himself, his voice deep and low, scarcely rising above a whisper.

"Curse her! How she scorns me — me, the vagabond poacher, the country yokel! No education, no — what was that word she used? — no culture! My God! how beautiful she is — so fair and stately and proud! She is like a princess. There is not another woman in the world like her! When she looks at me, I am on fire! When she scoffs at me, I go mad! Lord! what a fool I am! What a d——d fool!"

He was standing near a rude gray stone wall. He

stepped forward and leaned upon it, gazing steadfastly at the long line of yellow light where the sun had gone down. A damp, gray twilight was commencing to fall, and the landscape faded away almost before his eyes. But he did not move; he was thinking. Presently he began to mutter to himself again. He was the only living creature in the midst of a great solitude, and it was a relief to let his fiery, disjointed thoughts escape him.

"A boor! I was always a boor to her! She was always an aristocrat, even before she put on the silks and satins of young ladyhood. God! how beautiful she is! Curse her beauty! Curse her pride! How her bitter words send the hot blood racing through my veins to my heart! Oh, my God! if it were possible — if it were only possible to hold her in my arms but for a little while — and die! Ay, it would be worth dying for!"

The light of his great desire gleamed out of his eyes, lit up his bronzed face, and even showed itself in that sudden yearning movement, and outstretching of his hands towards the gray rolling mists amongst which, in fancy, he had seen for a moment, the face of this fair, proud girl. Perhaps at that moment, more than at any previous time in his life, he tasted alike the bitterest and the sweetest depths of his passion. It had come to him on the threshold of manhood, had become an indissoluble part of his sensations, a part of the man himself. He was the boor who loved a princess. It seemed to him that he could no more destroy that love than he could destroy himself. They were one and the same, one flesh and one blood, one body and one soul!

Yet, from the very days of its birth, there had been a curious impersonality about his worship. She had filled every dream his mind had ever conceived, her image had been painted in upon the canvas of his imagination with wonderfully glowing colours. She was to him the embodi-

ment of all that was sweet, and pure, and beautiful in womankind. And yet it had all been in a curious far-off way. He had never before dared to bring his image of her down to the physical world, to imagine what it would be like to hold her hand, to see her eyes look upon him kindly, to watch her lips smile at him, to assume some sort of personal proprietorship over her. But to-night something had lit the torch. It may have been his own sense of inward development, of emergence from the village boor to manhood and responsibility, the sense of having been brought nearer to her, at any rate so far as material circumstances and position can be considered. Or it may have been a dull, sickening fear which had shot through him when he had seen the added womanliness of her stature and movements, that some other man of her own rank might love her, and seek to break through the stately and dainty exclusiveness of her ripening maidenhood. The fear had stung him into a passionate desire for action, had given him a desperate courage with which to throw aside the dreamer, and boldly challenge his fate. His mind was full of half-formed resolves, of a multitude of daring plans, as he leaned over the wall and gazed across the shadowy landscape. One by one they became knitted into the strong purpose of the man. The hours that he spent then, in the gray, misty twilight, formed an era in his life. They became history with him. From that night a beautiful but impersonal dream was shattered, and a man's passion was born.

It was late when he got back to the farmhouse where he was staying. On the table was his supper and a letter. He looked at it carelessly at first, then with a quick start of surprise. He tore it open, and drew the lamp closer as he read:

"The Blue River Diggings,
"Oct. 18th.

"How are you, pard? Guess you're snug in the old country by now. There was a hell of a row here, after you left. Dan Cooper, he hurried up and was on your track as soon as it got about as you was gone, and took that skeery-faced kid, Skein, along. They ain't been heerd on since. I reckon you and the gel — she'd plenty of pluck, that gel had — would about square them two, if so happened as they catched you up!

"There has been a wonderful boom here, and you and me is in it, you bet! I dare say you've read all about it in the papers. I took on help after you went, and in three days we struck such a vein as ain't been heard on in these parts, I can tell you! We just shovelled out the gold like dirt. Lord! you should have been there to see the chaps all around, how mad they did get! We worked by daytime and by lantern-light, and we ain't got to the end of it yet. I reckon I've sent in to a broker at 'Frisco about twenty-eight thousand dollars' worth, and I've got as much more safe hid, waiting for the expressman. We're scooping it out every day. Besides this, I've bought and paid for four of the likeliest claims, and the store which I'm running myself, and making a pile at. I've invested a good bit in the store, for the diggings is three times as large as they were, and as the news of the boom spreads, all the greenhorns in 'Frisco 'll be here. The gold 'll be about gone, but they 'll want feeding. The profit from the store you and me divides, and also of course the gold, less all the expenses of running the show, and the help on the claim, which I reckon is your look-out. That's square, ain't it? Now I want a straight word with you. When you and me started pards, share and share alike, you planked down more coin than me, and you worked harder, for you're a powerful strong man. Now it's

the result of your labour and your coin as is turning up trumps, and what I want to say is, that we share up level all the profits from the claim and store, and if you says anything different, why, I chucks half into the Blue River, for I'll be —— if I touch it ! I'm most a lone man, and what I shall do with my pile I don't know! There ain't no call for you to come back. I've got some safe help, and a pal or two as I can trust, and I'm doing a big thing! You'll find twenty thousand dollars to your call at a chap's called Baring in London, when you like to go for it. The next draw will be a sight larger, but I've spent a good bit in buying claims, and stocking the store.

" P. S. — This has been an almighty day. The expressman just arrived. Am sending metal which I reckon will figger out at something like a hundred thousand dollars. You and me is in luck, Bryan.

" From your affect pard,

" PETE."

The letter fluttered down from Bryan's fingers, and he stood for a moment perfectly still. His brain was in a turmoil — this thing that had happened was almost too great to grasp. Then a look of triumph flashed in his eyes. His heart leaped up. Here were the muscles and the sinews for his struggle; here was the weapon with which to carve his way upwards. He stretched up his hands to the ceiling, and laughed out loud, waking a thousand echoes amongst the old rafters and beams.

" Mine! " he cried passionately. " It is the judgment of fortune! I shall win! "

Just once there glided like a ghost amongst his glowing thoughts and dreams, the image of a dark, sorrowing face, and his heart was thrilled for a moment with the low sweet voice of the woman who had given her soul to set him free.

But he clenched his teeth, and ground his heel into the floor. It was a thing past for ever — a black spot upon his life which he could never cleanse. He had sworn to himself to forget it; to live as though those days had never been! Nothing could alter them, nothing could ever efface his degradation. He could do but one thing, and that he would do — forget! Between his past and his future there lay stretched a mighty gulf. Not even with memory would he ever suffer it to be bridged over. He had sworn it at midnight on the great steamer as it ploughed its way through the rushing waters of the Atlantic; and that night, in the little farmhouse, he looked through the lattice window upon the moonlit night, and renewed his oath. The bitterness of the past should have no power to poison the future.

CHAPTER III

THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW LIFE

Two days later Bryan found himself in London. He arrived at Waterloo about midday, and was driven straight to one of the great hotels in Northumberland Avenue. Here he engaged a room, and sallying out again, turned westwards.

He had commenced life upon a new principle, or rather he was commencing a new life. For the first time he had travelled first-class, for the first time he was staying of his own choice in a fashionable hotel. He walked slowly down Pall Mall, Piccadilly, and Bond Street, noting all the men he met with new and attentive eyes. At the corner of Conduit Street, a brougham and pair of horses pulled up almost by his side, and its occupants, two men, got out, crossed the pavement, and entered a tailor's shop. Bryan hesitated for a moment; then he quietly followed them in.

His appearance in somewhat shabby and travel-stained clothes was a little singular in a fashionable part of London, but he carried himself well, and had an air of resolution, almost of dignity, which inspired a certain amount of respect. The man who came noiselessly across the thickly-carpeted room, with its swing-glasses and piles of neatly-folded cloth upon a mahogany counter, looked at him in faint surprise but listened to what he had to say civilly.

"I've just come home from California!" Bryan said simply. "I have plenty of money, and I want to be dressed like other men. Can you make me some clothes quickly?"

The man bowed.

"With great pleasure, sir! Do you require a complete outfit for town and country, may I ask, or only for town wear?"

Bryan considered for a moment. "First of all, I want one of those long black coats."

"Frock-coats, sir!"

"Yes, and trousers to go with it — a couple of pairs. Then I want an evening suit, and some tweed clothes and breeches for the country. I should like the frock-coat first!"

"Will you choose the material, sir?"

Bryan shook his head.

"I leave it to you! You had better take my measure!"

It was a task which occupied some little time. When it was over, Bryan drew a sigh of relief. He had been used to wearing ready-made clothes.

"When shall I call again?" he asked.

"To-morrow afternoon, sir, we will try on the coat, as I presume you wish to wear it in town!"

Bryan nodded, and walked out. At the corner of Bond Street he went into Scott's and bought a silk hat which he had sent to the hotel. A little further on, he went into a hosier's, and bought shirts, collars, ties, and gloves of the latest fashion. Then he paid Truefitt's a visit, had his hair cut, and his beard trimmed.

He lunched at a fashionable restaurant, drinking wine instead of beer, and watching the people closely. Afterwards he bought some books, and spent a good part of the afternoon in the National Gallery. In the evening he went to the Lyceum.

For three days he kept quiet, reading and visiting picture galleries most of the time, and going to a fresh theatre each evening. On the fourth, his clothes arrived, and, with a laugh which had almost a nervous tremor in it, he undid the parcel, and arrayed himself from head to foot in his new attire. The metamorphosis surprised even himself. He looked at his reflection in the glass with a certain vague displeasure. He was annoyed to believe that clothes could make such a difference. He was now to all outward appearance a gentleman, as well turned out, and as much at ease in his clothes as any of the men whom he had met and studied in the West End.

It was a fine morning, and he walked in the Park. On his way he bought himself a carnation, and, a few minutes afterwards, stopping to look at his reflection in a large plate-glass window, he burst out laughing. The thing seemed so comical to him, so unreal. It was hard indeed to believe that the tall and perfectly dressed man whose image he saw could be the boor who commenced life as a poaching vagabond.

The Park was full, and, strangely enough, Bryan had scarcely walked a hundred yards when he was able to test his new personality. A barouche and pair of horses were drawn up close to the railings, and a girl, sitting by the side of a stately gray-haired old lady, was talking to several men who stood around the carriage door. Bryan felt his heart give a great thump, but he bit his lip savagely and kept his face turned upon her. She met his gaze quite frankly, and with perfect unconcern, and bowed a little doubtfully as he raised his hat. Then their eyes seemed to meet, and he distinctly saw her start, and a slight colour flush her cheeks. He passed on, walking with just the same careless dignity, borne of his great strength, as when he had sauntered barefooted around his claim on the Blue River,

with his spade over his shoulder; and, of course, he did not look behind. When he returned in about ten minutes, the carriage was gone, and he did not see it again. He walked the Row from end to end, eagerly watching the stream of vehicles. It was in vain. He saw nothing more of the barouche with the brown liveries.

"She would think that I was mad!" he said to himself, with a short, dry laugh, as he turned homewards. "Perhaps I am!"

For six more days Bryan remained in London. He spent most of his time in what is called the West End, and visited every picture gallery that was open. He made a good many purchases, and walked every day in the Park, where his unusual height and tawny, handsome beard provoked a number of languid inquiries as to his identity, and awakened some amount of curiosity in the minds of certain society journalists.

Above all, he frequented places where he heard people talk, and carefully noted down in his memory the manner and form of their conversation. Night after night he sat in the stalls of one of the more popular theatres, inwardly chafing at the restraint of a high collar, and the tightness of his dress clothes; but listening to everything with a grim and serious intentness.

These were days of purgatory to him, but he went through it all with a stubborn and dogged resolution. On the seventh day he returned to Westshire.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOW OF A MEMORY

"A GENTLEMAN wishes to see you, sir!"

The Rev. Raymond Bettesford put down his pen, and glanced at the card which the trim little maidservant had laid before him. He rose to his feet at once, and regarded the tall figure of his visitor with some surprise.

"Mr. Bryan Bryan!" he said courteously. "Our new neighbour at the Old Hall, I believe! How do you do?"

He held out his hand, and Bryan gave it a grip which made him wince.

"I was proposing to call upon you this week," Mr. Bettesford continued, "but, to tell you the truth, I didn't know that you had taken up your quarters at the Hall yet. When did you arrive?"

"Only yesterday!" Bryan answered, taking the chair which the other had drawn out for him. "I've been in London for a week or so, looking round. I wanted to have a talk with you right away, so I didn't wait for you to come and see me. You're the Vicar here, aren't you?"

"I am the curate in charge!" Mr. Bettesford explained, a little stiffly. There was a certain brusqueness in Bryan's manner which did not seem quite in keeping with his bearing and appearance. "The Vicar is away on the Continent, at present!" he added.

Bryan looked at him steadily. He was a small, fair-haired young man, with a shrewd mouth and eyes, but somewhat worn face. The inspection was satisfactory, although he had expected to find an older man.

"Leaves you to do the work, eh!" Bryan remarked. "Well, here's what I came about. I'm an ignoramus who's made money — there are plenty of them about, as you know — and I want to improve myself. I want to know what is best in books, and literature, and art. I am willing to study, but I want directing. I can pay for it — glad to; that is to say, I should not expect to take up anybody's time for nothing!" he added a little clumsily, noticing a slight flush which had crept over the other's face. Bryan was quick at noticing things of that sort. He was a sensitive man himself.

"I — I really don't know what to say, Mr. Bryan," was the somewhat doubtful answer. "I have had no experience in teaching — and I'm not sure that I should be competent to direct you in the manner you require."

"I'll take the risk of that," Bryan answered calmly. "What I want to know is this. Have you got the time, and if you have, will you try it?"

"I have plenty of time, and I should be glad to try."

Mr. Bettesford answered frankly. He was beginning to appreciate his visitor better, and even to like him. "But the question is, what you want to learn — is it what I can teach you? You must have had some education, for you speak — pardon my remarking it — quite correctly. What people call culture nowadays is a many-sided thing, and though I have taken my degree, I am by no means a scholar!"

"I want you to teach me Latin and French, and to map out a course of reading for me in English literature," Bryan said. "I do not expect too much. I have read a good deal

in a disconnected way. It wants welding together. I don't want so much to take any regular lessons, if you can understand me; I want to come to you and ask questions! And about terms! How many hours could you give me a day? "

Mr. Bettesford considered.

" When could you come? " he asked. " I mean at what time of the day? "

" At any time," Bryan answered promptly.

" Then we might manage two or three! " Mr. Bettesford said.

" Thank you! And will you tell me — if you don't mind — what you think would be a fair sum for me to pay you? " Bryan asked hesitatingly.

Mr. Bettesford put his hands in his pockets, and laughed.

" Well, I don't know," he said. " How would a guinea a week —— "

" Too little! Ridiculous! " Bryan interrupted firmly. " I shall ask you to accept two guineas a week, and I shall come to-morrow at —— "

" Oh, at nine o'clock, if you like, but —— "

Bryan would hear nothing further. He shook hands with the curate, and hurried out.

" I shall be here at nine! " he called out from the gate. " Good afternoon! "

Mr. Bettesford turned back to the house. Instead of returning to his uncompleted sermon, however, he entered a long, low drawing-room — a quaint old room, with a huge window opening on the lawn, and many recesses. On a couch near the fire, a woman was lying.

She put down her book as he entered, and smiled. Raymond Bettesford cut a most unclerical caper, and then dragged a footstool up to her side.

" Hurrah! " he exclaimed, taking one of her thin hands, and stroking it while he talked. " Wonderful news — won-

derful! I've got a pupil — two guineas a week! I feel as though I'd come into a fortune! Just fancy! Two guineas a week!"

She turned a sweet, worn face towards him, and her dark eyes shone brightly underneath a wealth of wavy gray hair.

"Why, Raymond, you must be joking, surely!" she exclaimed. "Where could you get a pupil from, and at such terms?"

"I'm in solemn earnest," he answered. "Here's his card!"

She took it and held it for a moment or two in her thin fingers. She repeated it to herself twice, and then she laid it down, and half-closed her eyes.

"Two Bryans!" she remarked. "It is an odd name. Is that the father's card?"

"No; it's his own!" Raymond Bettesford explained. "He's not a boy! He's a man who's come into money. He looks as though he'd roughed it a good deal, but he's a splendid fellow, and he has a wonderful air of distinction about him. You'll be awfully interested to see him."

"When is he coming?" she asked.

"At nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Ah, there he goes! See! If you just turn your head a little, you'll see him through the side window. He's just vaulting that gate on to the moor. Jove! he can jump!"

She bent forward and watched Bryan's tall figure with a curious strained intentness. Her hand was pressed to her heart, and when Raymond spoke to her she did not hear him.

As soon as Bryan was out of sight, she leaned back on the couch, and closed her eyes.

"I am tired, Raymond!" she said wearily. "Shall I have time for a little sleep, I wonder, before tea?"

"Of course you will!" he answered. "I'll go away and tell them not to disturb you!"

He bent down and kissed her, then he went away softly. But she did not sleep. She lay with her eyes fixed upon the fire, and wet with tears.

"Bryan! Bryan!" she murmured softly. "Ah, me!"

CHAPTER V

A MEETING ON THE MOOR

"You've found out by this time that I didn't come to this part of the world altogether as a stranger!" Bryan said one afternoon to Raymond Bettesford.

They were on the top of Lone Barrow Down, the highest point of the moor, swept by the winds of sea and land, and as brown as a berry — walking across the open country with a reckless disregard of all footpaths which was in itself a delight to both of them. Away inland was a rolling stretch of wild moorland, with here and there a few shaggy cattle dotted about, and in the distance the broad imposing front of Wessemer Court. Into their faces was borne the spray from the gray winter sea, scarcely a quarter of a mile distant. Every now and then the roar of it filled the air.

Bettesford took off his clerical hat, and drew in a long breath of the salt wind before he answered.

"Yes," he said slowly. "You lived not far from here before you went abroad, didn't you?"

"I did — and a pretty character the people would give me, I expect!" Bryan answered, with a deep laugh. "I was a vagabond all the days of my youth, and I'm afraid there's some of the blood left in me still, in spite of all your efforts to polish me up. I shall break out some day!"

The Rev. Bettesford laughed confidently.

"I'm not afraid," he declared. "But since you've mentioned it, old fellow, were you really — a — a — poacher?"

"Ay, I should think that I was!" Bryan answered readily. "There were a good many sins laid to my account in those days. I helped myself to Lord Wessemer's game, I drank, I fought, and I very seldom worked."

"They told me one good thing of you, though," Bettesford said. "John Higginson told me — excuse me — that you were a blackguard amongst the men, but a gentleman to all women and children. I was glad to hear that."

"Ah!"

Bryan stopped short and turned his face seaward. Out of the mists that rode upon the gray restless waters a woman's face seemed to have floated before his eyes — a woman's dark, sweet, passionate face. He saw her, pistol in hand, facing his enemy on the wild Californian desert, steeling her nerves and hardening her heart to kill, that he might live. He saw her bending over his wooden bed in their rooms at San Francisco, once more gentle and feminine, nursing him with unflagging tenderness, bearing with his sick fancies, selling furniture, and jewelry, and even her clothes from her back, to buy him strengthening food and wine. A curious depression stole over him. The wind that blew in from the sea seemed to bring to his ears her last despairing words, and the blackness of his own ingratitude seemed written in flaming letters across the sky. Again he saw that look of inward agony, of supreme pain and despair which had almost spiritualized her face, in those moments of her last great sacrifice. Poor Myra! Was ever the deep, strong love of a woman so ill requited? He had left her — to what? A cold shudder swept through his veins. He gave a sharp little cry and turned away inland, walking so fast that Raymond Bettesford had hard work to keep near him.

He slackened his pace presently, and looked down at his companion.

"I forgot all about you," he said apologetically. "I'm so used to being alone. Something came back to me. Damnation!"

Bettesford frowned. "I do wish you would not swear," he said.

Bryan laughed. "Oh, I'll be careful," he answered. "I can't get out of my old habits all at once; and, Bettesford, there is one little corner of my life that I'd give my little finger to be able to blot out. The memory of it maddens me. I can't see clearly how I came to be to blame, but when I think of it I feel like a mean coward, like a villain, and I hate myself."

"Was it in California?" the other asked.

"Yes. Some day I'll tell you about it, and you shall be my judge. Not now; it hurts too much. Away with it! What a glorious walk we are having!"

They turned their backs upon the sea, and walked inland, side by side. It was odd what a friendship had sprung up between the two men, to all appearance the very antithesis of each other. There was something in their very walk, in the tone of their speech when they addressed one another, which proclaimed a perfect understanding. Physically, the contrast between them was almost absurd. Raymond Bettesford's fair, kindly little face, with its shrewd mouth and weak eyes, did not reach to Bryan's shoulder, whilst his clerical black clothes, a little the worse for wear, only accentuated the smallness of his stature. Bryan's great height seemed positively added to by his well-cut Norfolk coat and knickerbockers. Then his face, bronzed, yet full of power and fire, with his tawny beard reduced now to fashionable dimensions, and his bright blue eyes, seemed full of vigorous and virile animal life. No contrast could

have been greater than Raymond Bettesford's pallid oval face, with its small features and refined expression. Yet from the very first, the two men seemed to have understood one another. The rugged strength and self-reliance of Bryan's nature was attractive to Bettesford, whilst his own shrewd good-nature and kindliness had appealed equally to Bryan. The curate's life had been lonely enough before his pupil's arrival; now he seemed to have found a new interest, and a constant companion. If ever there was an outlying farm to visit, or a service to take in a distant village, Bryan was ready and eager to go; in fact, most of the instruction took place out-of-doors. Every morning they walked together on the moorland, to Raymond Bettesford's infinite advantage, and every afternoon, wet or fine, Bryan was expected to appear with him at Miss Bettesford's one effort of the day, the dispensing of afternoon tea. That Bryan should have become such an instant favourite with his aunt, puzzled even Raymond. But so it was. Every afternoon her face lit up at his coming, and became anxious if he were a few minutes late. And Bryan, a little nervous sometimes with men, was absolutely at his ease with her, and curiously enough, had been so from the first moment that Raymond, with some trepidation, had brought him, and introduced him. He would sit and talk with her for hours, bending over her frail, delicate figure with a devotion that was almost reverential, and ministering to all her little invalid wants with wonderful forethought and care. Once a week he rode off to the market-town on his great bay horse, bringing back a pile of library books, and always a basket of fruit and flowers. He did the shopping for the family on those occasions, and many were the odd little commissions which he laughingly accepted.

These days formed a sort of interlude for Bryan — a link between his two lives — whose passionless peace he found it always a pleasure to look back upon.

The Old Hall, of which he had become the tenant, was barely half a mile from the Vicarage, and every morning he came striding across the fields, with his pipe in his mouth, at about nine o'clock. For an hour, sometimes longer, they read together; then there was a walk, and often the two men would lunch together at the Hall. In the afternoon there would be more walking, probably a round of parish duties, and at four o'clock Miss Bettesford was ready to give them tea. Bryan always went home to dinner — his appetite he used to say, was too huge for him to inflict himself on them for more than one meal a day — but he came down again in the evening, and the two men smoked and talked, and read the time away, unless Miss Bettesford was still up, in which case they spent the first part of the evening in the drawing-room with her. It was a new life to Bryan, this little glimpse of refined yet simple domesticity, and it came to him with an added zest at the very moment when he found himself in reality upon the threshold of a new world. For Raymond Bettesford was in many ways admirably qualified to fill the post of instructor, and Bryan himself was an eager and an apt pupil. All that was rough and course in the man seemed to be purely superficial, the inevitable adjuncts of his early surroundings and later associations. It was wonderful what progress he made. Even Bettesford, an enthusiastic master and proud of his pupil, was amazed at the gentleness and self-repression which came over Bryan in all his conversation and intercourse with Miss Bettesford. The man who could behave as he did by intuition, must be a man of the very finest instincts, and yet there were times when a certain look came into his face — it was there this afternoon — which he had learned to dread. At such times he felt that Bryan was outside his control — that the old vagabondism was triumphant, and the animal nature of the man in revolt

against the trammels of knowledge and culture. Bryan had not yet given him his whole confidence — he could only guess from occasional fits of gloom, at some dark corner in his life, the memory of which, in the light of his rapidly expanding experience, must naturally be galling and wearisome. To-day he surmised, for the first time, that it had to do with a woman. The suspicion gave him no shock. In all matters of his own life he was scrupulously faithful to himself and to his vows, but he was no Jesuit. If Bryan had chosen at that moment to have told him all about Myra and his life with her, he would have been a very lenient judge. But Bryan did not tell him. He did not feel that he could tell anybody. No one else could understand it. So they walked on in unbroken silence; Bryan a few yards apart with knitted brows, and a shadow still upon his face.

In the midst of the desolate country they came to a road which wound its way across the bare moor, and disappeared upon the hillside in the distance — a road without any semblance of a hedge, and here and there completely hidden by the clustering furze-bushes. They were already halfway across it when Bettesford stood still, gazing over the moor inland.

"Quite a procession coming down the hill," he remarked. "Not very often one sees a vehicle upon this road either!"

Bryan, too, stood still and gazed. He was not interested, but anything which afforded a prospect of escape from his present thoughts was welcome. In the far distance, something all bright and glittering was coming at a measured pace along the tortuous road, followed by some other vehicle. They watched for a moment or two. Then Bettesford broke into a little laugh.

"It is only a Wessemer carriage and the luggage carts," he exclaimed. "The people coming down from town, I suppose! Come along. We don't want to see them!"

But Bryan did not move.

"Are they coming back to the Court to stay — already, then?" he asked. "The Earl and Lady Helen?"

Bettesford nodded, and sent a pebble flying with his stick.

"I suppose so," he answered. "I heard that they were coming this week! Come on!"

Still Bryan did not move. He stood in the middle of the road, with his face turned towards the cavalcade, now rapidly approaching. They disappeared for a moment in a dip of the road, and Bettesford again laid his hand upon Bryan's arm.

"Come along, man!" he exclaimed, glancing into his face with surprise. "Are you turned to stone? You can't stand there and gape at them."

Bryan moved slowly off the road on to the turf, without speaking. There was an odd look in his downcast face, strange to his companion.

"Let us walk slowly," he said. "I should like to see the Earl, I have not seen him since I was a boy."

Bettesford shrugged his shoulders and gave in. They walked a few paces and then turned round. The heavy, smoothly-rolling barouche, drawn by a pair of great satin-coated bays, was close at hand now. The men on the box wore cockades, and the Wessemer liveries. There were rosettes upon the horses' ears, and a coronet upon the low panel. Now it was almost opposite to them, and Bryan's gaze grew steadfast. On the left side sat the Earl of Wessemer, leaning back amongst the cushions, his dark, classical face destitute of all colour, seeming paler than ever from its setting of rich furs; and by his side was Lady Helen wrapped in sealskins, but with her veil raised, and a faint pink colour in her cheeks, as though she had been enjoying the fresh strong breeze blowing in across the level land from the sea.

She saw them first, and leaned forward with slightly raised eyebrows and incredulous gaze.

Quite unconsciously the two watchers, or rather one of them, were forming a somewhat striking picture. Bryan was standing at his full height on the edge of the moor, with no background save of sky and air, against which his great figure stood out with a wonderful statuesque vividness. He carried his cap still in his hand, and the wind was sweeping through his clustering hair and tawny beard. His head was thrown back, and his eyes, bright and piercing underneath his dark contracted eyebrows, seemed to flash with a sort of challenge as they met Lady Helen's. By his side Raymond Bettesford's slim figure and polite bow seemed dwarfed into a sort of bathos. The very ease with which he raised his broad-brimmed hat, savouring so essentially of the conventional, seemed to strike an odd discordant note in the little tableau. He was utterly unconscious that anything out of the common was happening. The dramatic side of the meeting upon the bare moorside was lost upon him.

For a moment there came no response to his salutation. Lady Helen seemed unable to escape from the steady, level fire of those clear bright eyes which never swerved from hers, and the Earl, although he had not abandoned or altered his reclining position, was gazing fixedly at Bryan. Then the whole little tableau came suddenly to its natural ending. The carriage, which had not slackened its pace, rolled on. Just at the last second, Lady Helen withdrew her eyes, and bowed half mechanically, and with a faint smile, to the curate. Then she leaned back amongst the cushions, and Lord Wessemer turned slightly towards her, evidently asking a question. Bryan took a deep breath, and watched the carriage disappear.

Bettesford glanced at him oddly. " Lady Helen was not

particularly gracious," he remarked, "and the Earl never even looked at me. Bryan, old chap," he continued, "you'll forgive me, won't you, but you must not stare at people like that, even if they are interesting. They seemed quite disturbed."

Bryan withdrew his eyes from the road, and looked at his companion for a moment blankly, as though he had not understood. Then suddenly he burst into a mighty laugh, a laugh which went ringing away over the level country, and came back in strange echoes from the hills.

Bettesford looked at him in amazement. Decidedly his pupil was a very strange fellow!

CHAPTER VI

LIKE POISON LINGERING IN THE BRAIN

It was quite a cosy little tea-party. Miss Bettesford as usual presided, seated in a low chair with a small round table drawn up to her side. As a rule, things were very plainly served at the Vicarage, but afternoon tea was always a dainty repast. The silver teapot was of quaint "Queen Anne" design, and the cups and saucers of old Derby blue. There was hot toast, cake, and bread and butter, and a curious old cut-glass jug of cream. For a household of limited means, Miss Bettesford used to say, it was the only meal which it was possible to serve in an artistic manner. It was the one delight of her long days to welcome her boys, as she was beginning to call her nephew and his strange pupil, in the long, low-roofed drawing-room, and have them sit around the fire in little impossible chairs, and talk to her of the day's doings. It was very seldom indeed that they were disturbed by callers. It was a sparsely populated neighbourhood as regards county gentlefolk, and Miss Bettesford was known to be, in her way, a proud woman, and not disposed to encourage the advances of strangers. So they generally had it all to themselves.

They had been talking of the Wessemers, for it was only a day or two after their arrival, and the event was too important a one to be ignored. From the low French win-

dows, the flag at the Court could be seen floating in the breeze. Miss Bettesford had spent a good many hours looking at it — and wondering.

"You knew the Earl well, didn't you, Aunt, when he was only Mr. Nugent?" Raymond asked. "What was he like then?"

Miss Bettesford leaned back, and looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"What was he like?" she said. "Do you mean in appearance?"

He shook his head. "No! I mean altogether — in all ways," he answered vaguely, taking another piece of toast and sipping his tea. "Mrs. Grant told me the other day that he was a famous steeple-chase rider once, and won the Grand National on his own horse. One would scarcely associate any liking for that sort of thing with him now!"

"His tastes changed a good deal after he went abroad, I believe," Miss Bettesford answered. "He was in the diplomatic service, you know. He was secretary to the Embassy at Rome for several years, and they say that if he had chosen to go in for politics, he would have had a great career. He wrote a volume of verse, too, and people were beginning to talk about him as a second Byron; but directly he found that he was in a fair way to become famous, wrote no more. He was always like that. He affects to despise everything and everybody, and to prefer a life of cultured isolation. The last time I saw him — it was a long while ago — I heard him say that England was a country in which it was utterly impossible to live. He has spent most of his life at Florence, as you know."

"I'd like awfully to read that volume of his poems!" Raymond remarked.

"So should I," Bryan echoed in his deep voice.

Miss Bettesford looked searchingly at Bryan for a mo-

ment. Then she felt in her pocket, and produced her keys.

"Well, suppose I indulge you," she said slowly. "I dare say you'll be disappointed."

Raymond sprang up, nearly upsetting his cup.

"What! have you got them?" he cried.

She handed him her keys. "Look in my secretary, in the third drawer," she directed.

Raymond retreated to the other end of the room, jingling the keys in his hand. Bryan looked up from his ottoman by Miss Bettesford's side. He leaned over towards her.

"I have heard people speak of the Earl as an utterly selfish man — as a wicked man!" he said slowly. "Was this true?"

She appeared troubled. The firelight was falling upon her sweet, wan face, with its soft crown of white hair, and Bryan could see that the gentle repose of her features had been disturbed by his question.

"I am afraid that in great measure — it is true," she answered sadly. "He called himself a philosopher — Philip the Epicurean, was the name he was known by at college — and what he called philosophy, other people would have called by a harder name. He used to admit that he had no morals, and no religion. Yet there were people who were very fond of him."

"Ah!"

Bryan looked steadily into the fire. She watched him, watched the firelight flash upon his bowed face and ruddy brown beard, and gleam in his set bright eyes; and when she withdrew her furtive glance she shivered a little. It was a noble head, but the lines of the mouth were firm and cruel.

There was a little exclamation from behind. Raymond had advanced out of the shadows, holding before him à

small volume bound in sage-green morocco. He was looking at the title-page.

"Why, Aunt, this is a presentation copy!" he cried. "It was given to you by him, and he calls you by your Christian name! Here it is:

"'To Marion, from Guy B. Nugent.'"

There was a moment's deep silence. She was leaning back in her chair, and her face was in the shadow.

"I had forgotten — the inscription!" she said. "But I think I told you that we used to see a good deal of one another just then. Your grandfather was Vicar here, you know!"

"Why, of course!" Raymond exclaimed. "This is interesting!"

He sat down, and commenced turning over the pages. Miss Bettesford looked at Bryan.

"You haven't had your second cup of tea!" she said quietly. "How silent we all are this afternoon!"

Bryan held out his cup readily.

"I'm not going without it, all the same," he answered. "I never tasted such tea in my life."

She smiled faintly as she lifted the silver teapot.

"I should like to have seen what you made in those tin things — pannikins, didn't you call them?"

Bryan made a wry face.

"Seeing would have been quite enough," he remarked. "We had no milk, you know, and often no sugar. One chap had a goat, and we milked it sometimes — but it wasn't very good!"

"I don't think men are any good at all at making tea," she said, smiling, as she handed him the dainty little blue cup. "It needs a woman!"

A deep flush stole into Bryan's cheeks, and he made a sudden impetuous movement which nearly upset the little

bamboo table. A swift vision of his evening meal so deftly prepared for him in that far-away pinewood shanty on the banks of the Blue River, had flashed up before him. Everything was there — his memory had been absolutely faithful to him. There was his little bed in the corner, neatly made, and half concealed; the rude table, scrubbed and polished, and his supper set out upon it with a care and neatness which had been a revelation to him. There was an attempt at a white cloth, a thing he had never dreamed of, and in the centre a great bunch of scarlet blossoms gathered from the shrubs outside. Even the floor had been cleaned of the débris of many a night's smoking and drinking, and the odour of stale tobacco smoke had unaccountably disappeared, to be replaced by the sweet aromatic perfume of the clustering flowers. But more than anything else, the memory of the girl had clung to him. There she stood, just where the sunlight touched her hair, and flashed in her glad, dark eyes, straight and slim in the tight-fitting serge dress, but as supple and elegant as some beautiful wild creature of the woods. He heard her little musical cry of welcome, and saw the faint colour flushing in her dusky cheeks — almost he could feel the soft caress of her arms, and the touch of her passionate kiss upon his lips. Bryan ground his teeth together, utterly forgetful for the moment of his whereabouts. Was he never to escape from the poison of these memories? His cheeks burned with a sort of shame that they should have found their way into this little home circle whose sweet refinement had become so unspeakably dear to him. For the first effects of his association with Miss Bettesford and this quiet, secluded life at the Vicarage had been the growth of a sort of ultra-Puritanism, from which standpoint he looked back with absolute horror upon his Californian life, and everything connected with Myra and his association with her. Even to think of those days while he sat side by

side with Miss Bettesford, and looked into her sweet, worn face, was like a sacrilege; it was like bringing some unclean thing into the presence of God. In another moment he felt that he must have cried out under the lash of these memories, but there came a welcome interruption. Raymond commenced reading aloud a dainty little sonnet which had taken his fancy.

"These verses are delightful!" he exclaimed, shutting up the volume with regret. "No wonder that he had to give up writing to escape fame! What a man he must be to know!"

No one answered. There was a brief silence, broken by unaccustomed sounds from without — the trampling of horses' feet in the little avenue, and the rolling of wheels. Then an open carriage flashed past the window, and came to a sudden standstill before the door.

"Talk of — an angel!" cried Raymond, springing up.

"And here comes the Earl of Wessemer!" concluded Bryan, with a little hard laugh.

But Miss Bettesford did not move or speak. She was sitting as one turned to stone.

CHAPTER VII

THE EARL OF WESSEMER

THERE was scarcely a moment's delay before the trim little maid threw open the door, and announced the visitor:

"The Earl of Wessemer!"

He was following her close behind, but stood still for a moment upon the threshold, whilst she passed him and set down a rose-shaded lamp upon a little stand. Miss Bettesford was leaning back in her chair with half-closed eyes. The two men had risen.

He was wrapped from head to foot in a long fur coat, and he carried a sealskin cap in his hand. As he moved slowly forward towards them, and came into the broad circle of the dancing firelight, a sort of glow seemed to fall upon his perfectly-shaped head, with its classic features and full dark eyes. He wanted only the limp — Raymond declared afterwards — and he would have been a perfect elderly Byron.

He walked up to Miss Bettesford's side with extended hand, and a very slight smile upon his lips.

"I owe you a thousand apologies for this informal call," he said, bending over her hand. "Last night I heard that you were living here with your nephew, and I could not deny myself the pleasure of this visit."

"We are glad to see you, Lord Wessemer," she answered quietly.

"And this is your nephew, of course," he said, shaking hands with Raymond, "and this ——"

He had turned a little abruptly to where Bryan was standing exactly opposite to him, and looked at him fixedly. There was something striking in the appearance of the two men, both unusually tall, and sharing a common air of distinction, and yet so utterly different. Bryan, drawn up to his full height, and with his head thrown back, seemed to tower over the Earl, and he did not flinch for a moment from the other's keen scrutiny. Neither of them moved a muscle. There was a shade of something more than ordinary curiosity in Lord Wessemer's face, but it faded away before Bryan's perfect immovability. There was not the slightest trace of a smile upon his lips, or any sign of embarrassment.

"This is my nephew's friend and a new neighbour of ours," Miss Bettesford said, breaking the momentary silence. "Mr. Bryan!"

The Earl bowed slightly. He did not offer his hand, and Bryan had clasped his behind him, as was often his custom when standing.

"Ah, we met Mr. Bryan and your nephew on the moor, I think, on the day of our arrival," Lord Wessemer said, dropping into a low chair. "What a wild, bleak country this is!"

"You must find it so, after Florence," Raymond remarked.

The Earl shrugged his shoulders.

"Florence is the draughtiest city in the world," he declared. "I am afraid I have outgrown my love for it. I have bought a villa at Algiers, and I shall winter there in future. Florence has become a city of ghosts to me. My few friends have all left it, or died. The English element has become absorbed in the American. It was time

for me to come away. Pardon me! Do I see a teapot there, Miss Bettesford? "

"I am so sorry, I forgot to ask you," Miss Bettesford said, ringing the bell. "You will have some tea, won't you? "

"If I may — a single cup. One gets nauseated with green tea *a la Russe* on the Continent. English tea with cream is the only tea fit to drink. By-the-bye, Mr. Bettesford, I had a letter from you about some schools, I think. I don't believe in education myself, but I have told my agent to call upon you, and take your instructions. Whatever you wish, shall be done."

"I am very much obliged, Lord Wessemer," Raymond answered earnestly, with a flushed face. Those few careless words meant more to him than he could possibly have expressed. Henceforth he regarded Lord Wessemer in a new light.

Their visitor stayed for half an hour, chatting pleasantly, and every now and then, during the pauses in the conversation, glancing keenly at Bryan, who sat apart and talked very little. Towards the end of his visit he rose, and looked towards the conservatory.

"Are you still as fond of palms as ever, Miss Bettesford?" he asked. "I caught a glimpse of banks of green as I drove past."

"Yes, I am still fond of them," she answered. "I have only a few, though."

"Will you show them to me? "

He rose and offered his arm, bending over her with the easy grace of a courtier. She hesitated for a moment, and then slowly rising, placed her fingers upon his coat-sleeve.

"They are scarcely worth looking at," she said, "I have only one or two that are at all rare."

They crossed the room and entered the little glass house,

Lord Wessemer closing the door after them with some careless remark about the draught. Neither of them made any pretence at examining the palms. She stood leaning against the wall, with her hands pressed to her heart, and very pale. He stood over her, his eyes fixed upon hers as though they were trying to read her thoughts.

"Who is that young man?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I do not know. He has come to the Old Hall. He reads with Raymond. I know no more of him."

"Is this true?"

"As I live!"

He hesitated.

"Have you noticed anything about him?"

"It is fancy!" she said hoarsely. "It must be fancy!"

"Has he given any account of himself at all?"

"None — except that he made his money abroad. I dare not question him. Sometimes — his eyes frighten me!"

The Earl bent over a palm, and let its slender threads run through his fingers.

"You must let me know, if — if ——"

"Don't!" she cried. "You have no right to come here at all! It is terrible! I — I am not strong!"

He looked into her worn, white face, and sighed. He had made sonnets to it when the eyes had been soft and bright, and the hair golden. He was an æsthete, and the decay of beauty was painful to him.

"Permit me!" he said, offering his arm. "It is too cold for you here!"

They were back again in the warm drawing-room after an absence of barely five minutes. But Miss Bettesford tottered a little as she walked, although she made no effort to lean upon Lord Wessemer's arm. Bryan, who was watch-

ing, sprang up and moved towards her. She left the Earl, and gratefully accepted his support.

"Thank you!" she said, leaning heavily upon him. "I am afraid that I am not very strong to-day!"

Lord Wessemer murmured a little regretful sentence, and stood prepared to take his leave.

"Will you lunch with me to-morrow, Mr. Bettesford?" he asked, as he shook hands with him.

"I shall be very pleased," Raymond answered at once.

"And if your friend, Mr. Bryan, will pardon the informality, perhaps he will accompany you?" Lord Wessemer added, turning to Bryan.

"I shall be glad to come!" Bryan answered promptly.

The two men bowed. Then Lord Wessemer bent once more over Miss Bettesford.

"Helen will be coming to see you very soon," he said. "If she can persuade you to come and see my palms, and pay us a little visit, it will make us very happy. Once more, good afternoon."

Raymond walked with him to the front door. In the little drawing-room, they could hear the sound of courteous voices, the closing of the carriage door, and the trampling of the horses as they pawed up the gravel of the little avenue. To her, the sound seemed to come from a great distance, and echoed faintly in her ears. She was passing through minutes of torture — she, a weak woman for whom excitement was death. And Bryan, kneeling by her side, with his eyes looking into hers, seemed also to realize in some vague way the acute tension of those long minutes. He never knew exactly why he did it — it was one of those impulses which leap up from the heart; but, as the carriage drove off, he took the slender white hands which had been resting in his broad palm, and pressed them tenderly to his lips.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TOTTERING OF THE BARRIER

The stable clock was striking two when Raymond Bettesford and Bryan arrived at Wessemer Court on the following morning. They were shown by a footman in scarlet livery into the billiard-room — really a part of the great hall — where the Earl stood, watching a game between two of his neighbours.

He shook hands with them, and introduced Bryan to the two men who were playing — Captain Forrester, and Sir George Brankhurst. They all three remained watching the game, Bryan standing by Lord Wessemer's side.

"We are waiting lunch for my ward, Lady Helen," he said. "She has driven to the station to meet her brother. An excellent cannon, Brankhurst! Do you understand billiards, Mr. Bryan?"

Bryan, who had played once or twice in the great second-class hotels of San Francisco with men who wore but a soiled shirt and a pair of trousers, and who spat on the floor and swore volubly after every stroke, could scarcely refrain from smiling as he glanced round the lofty room, with its domed roof and stately appointments, and noticed the silent nonchalance of the two men.

"I have played occasionally on an American table — without pockets!" he answered. "This seems a very different thing, though."

"Perhaps you would like to try in a few minutes?" the Earl suggested. "This game is nearly up."

Bryan shook his head.

"Thanks! I'd much rather watch."

The windows looked out upon the broad avenue, and, just then, a phaeton and pair of horses drove rapidly past, and drew up at the front door. At the same time Sir George Brankhurst made the winning stroke, and carefully replaced his cue in the stand.

"I haven't seen Gerald for nearly four years," he remarked, turning towards the door. "I wonder if he is as much like his sister as ever?"

They all went out into the hall, Bryan keeping as much as possible in the background, but of necessity a conspicuous figure. Lady Helen was standing at the foot of the broad oak staircase in the centre of the hall, and by her side was a tall, fair boy in a light travelling-coat.

"Well, Gerald," said the Earl kindly. "Home again, then!"

"Yes, sir; and not half sorry, either! How do you do, Sir George?"

He shook hands all round. Then his eyes fell upon Bryan, and he gave a start of amazement. He took a quick step forward, and then hesitated.

"Why, it isn't — why — my God, it is!" he cried. "Of all the wonderful things in the world!"

He held out both his hands, and seized Bryan's. Bryan was not looking particularly well pleased.

"How are you?" he said gruffly. It was odd, but at the sight of the boy and the associations he evoked, his voice and his bearing had suddenly altered. He was in San Francisco again.

"You two have met before, then!" the Earl remarked, looking from one to the other in polite surprise.

"Met before!" the boy repeated, with an odd little note of seriousness in his tone. "It was lucky for me that we did meet before. He saved my life in San Francisco!"

A sudden exclamation escaped from Lord Wessemer's compressed lips, and he turned a shade paler. At any other time so rare a departure from his innate nonchalance could scarcely have passed unnoticed.

"Are you not making a mistake, Gerald?" he said. "This is Mr. Bryan, our new neighbour at the Old Hall."

Bryan's composure had come back to him as suddenly as it had left.

"I was in San Francisco a short time ago," he said drily.

"Of course you were!" Gerald exclaimed. "I should have known you anywhere — anyhow! I have always hoped that we should meet again, but I never dreamed of its being here!"

"We must hear all about it!" Lord Wessemer said.

They had formed a little group in the centre of the hall. Outside the circle the butler was hovering, for the luncheon bell had rung as the men had issued from the billiard-room.

"It is not worth telling!" Bryan said quickly. "I knew San Francisco better than Mr. Wessemer, and I was able to render him some slight service. I should prefer nothing more being said about it!"

Bryan frowned, and looked straight at Gerald Wessemer. The boy closed his mouth. There was something about Bryan's manner which made it hard to disobey him at any time. The story would have remained untold for the present, but for Lady Helen.

"Gerald, I insist upon hearing it now," she exclaimed, laying her hand upon his shoulder. "Mr. Bryan will not object — if I wish it!"

She looked appealingly at him, her proud young face for

the first time relaxed. He felt his heart beat furiously. He nodded to Gerald. He had nothing more to say.

"Well, it isn't particularly creditable to me, but I'm awfully glad to tell it!" Gerald declared, with a little laugh. "Hazelrigg — fellow I was travelling with, you know — sort of tutor," he explained for the benefit of Sir George and Captain Forrester, "was laid up at San Francisco, and I went round alone. I found out a restaurant — an odd, out-of-the-way sort of place — and got a bit thick with a fellow there. He had won quite a lot of money from me, but he was a plausible, gentlemanly sort of chap, and I was a young fool; and anyhow, there we were one night having dinner together, and he was going to take me to a place where I could have my revenge afterwards, he said. Well, Mr. Bryan came in while we were there, and I noticed that he looked at me rather curiously, and presently he came up and tapped me on the shoulder, and asked whether he could have a word with me. I got up, and he led me a few steps away and told me, like a regular good fellow, that the chap I was with was a professional gambler and a cheat, and begged me not to have anything to do with him. Of course, like a young fool, I got hot and indignant, and I'm afraid I told him to mind his own business. Well, he shrugged his shoulders, and went away. After dinner, the chap — Mercier he called himself — took me to a regular gambling-hell, and though I pretended that I did not believe a word of what Mr. Bryan had told me, I found myself watching him now and then, and, sure enough, I caught him bringing a king of hearts out of his pocket-handkerchief. Of course, I flung down my cards, and called out 'Cheat!' as loud as I could. There was an awful row. Mercier leaped up and whipped a revolver out of his pocket, swearing all the time like mad. He leaned over the table, and pointed it straight at me. I thought I was done, but all of a sudden,

just as Mercier's hand was upon the trigger, Mr. Bryan, who had been sitting close behind me, sent a tumbler full of spirits straight in Mercier's face, and blinded him. He fired, but missed me. Then before he could raise his hand again, I heard Mr. Bryan cry out so that all the glasses in the place rattled:

"'Hands down! First man who stirs, I shoot!'

"I saw every one in the room go stiff, and there was a dead silence. I looked round, almost afraid to breathe, and there was Mr. Bryan with his back to the wall, and a revolver in each hand, one pointed dead at Mercier, and another towards a group of his pals who had been standing round the bar. There was such a silence in the room that you could have heard a pin drop. I could hear my own heart beat, and I could hear Mercier breathing hard, and glaring at Mr. Bryan like a madman.

"Then Mr. Bryan spoke without looking at me.

"'Get out of this place, youngster!' he said quietly. 'Out you go this second!'

"I never thought of disobeying him. Up I got and walked down the room, and no one offered to stop me. But at the door I waited. I wanted to see the end. I don't think I ever remember anything so awful as that silence. Every one was glaring at Mr. Bryan, but nobody dared move. All of a sudden Mercier's hand went up, and Mr. Bryan's followed it like lightning. The two shots rang out almost together. Mercier's was too late, but" — the boy hesitated — "your shot went through his heart, didn't it?"

Bryan nodded grimly. There was a little audible stir. Lady Helen was very quiet and pale, and her eyes were fixed upon Bryan as though she were fascinated.

"There was a regular hullabaloo then!" Gerald continued. "The shots rang out one after the other, but the place was filled with smoke, and no one could see distinctly.

I suppose that is why Mr. Bryan wasn't much hurt, for every one was firing at him. Then I saw him lift up one of the cowboys who had got close up to him with a knife, and hurl him back amongst the others, knocking them down like ninepins. Oh, it was a lovely row!" he went on, with a little burst of enthusiam. "Then, when they were all in the wildest confusion, Mr. Bryan sprang to the door, caught my arm, and away we ran for our lives. We didn't stop until we got into one of the avenues. Then he just laid his hand upon my shoulder, and gave me some good advice — I didn't forget it, either — and before I could get out a single word of thanks, he was gone, and I didn't know even his name! And, Mr. Bryan," the boy added, with a bright sparkle in his eyes, "I'm more glad than I can say, to find you here, for I owe you my life, and I hope that we shall be friends!"

He held out his hand impulsively, and Bryan took it.

"Don't think too much of it, my boy!" he said kindly. "We get used to rows out there, you know. But I'm glad to see you again!"

Then his heart gave a great throb. Lady Helen had glided before him, and was looking into his face with a faint glow in her cheeks, and very soft eyes.

"Mr. Bryan," she said, "will you shake hands with me, too? Gerald is my only brother, and I could not have spared him!"

Bryan could find safety only in silence. A sudden fire flashed in his eyes at the touch of her soft fingers, and his heart beat madly. Then there was a pause which, save for Lord Wessemer's tact, might have become an awkward one.

"It is really a most marvellous rencontre!" he said. "But don't let us overpower Mr. Bryan, or he will begin to wish that he had left Gerald to fight his own battles. Suppose we talk it over at luncheon!"

There were several other guests staying in the house, who kept dropping in to luncheon one by one, and notwithstanding Bryan's protests, the story was told over a good many times, and he found himself the recipient of a good deal of attention. He was sitting at Lady Helen's right hand, and he knew that it was she who had had the places altered.

"I declare I haven't enjoyed a thrill for ever such a long time!" one young lady declared to Sir George Brankhurst. "Fancy sitting at the same table with a man who has killed another man like that! Isn't it fascinating? I do wish that I could get to talk with him! I shall make papa call, and then we may get him to dinner. He looks the part so, too, doesn't he?"

Sir George put up his eyeglass, and stared at Bryan.

"Egad, he does!" he answered. "By-the-bye, does any one know who he is and where he came from?"

"I don't care a bit where he came from," the young lady answered. "I think he's lovely!"

And so Bryan came in for a great deal of attention, and received it in such a manner that no one could possibly doubt but that he was a gentleman. Raymond Bettesford was so delighted that he could scarcely contain himself.

"I'm awfully glad, old chap," he exclaimed, when they were alone together for a moment after luncheon. "Fancy your being such an out-and-out brick!"

"I wish they wouldn't make such a fuss!" Bryan answered, laughing. "I say, Raymond," he added seriously, "you were opposite me at luncheon. Did you see anything of the boor, eh?"

"Not a particle!" cried Raymond heartily. "What rubbish! Why, you're a perfect avalanche of social success! You carry all before you!"

Gerald came up to them just then, and beckoned Bryan away. "I say, old chap, Helen wants to speak to you a

minute," he exclaimed. "She's in the conservatory. Come on!"

Bryan found her sitting alone in the winter gardens. Gerald strolled away for a moment to find a light for his cigarette. She looked up at him, smiling.

"I just wanted to ask you to forgive me for being very rude last time we met — at Mrs. Holmes'!" she said softly. "You see — I had no idea that you were — that you could make yourself what you are! That sounds horribly confused, I know, but it's your own fault. You should not make such an enigma of yourself! I was rude because I thought it was for the best. Do you see?"

"Perfectly," he answered. "It is I who should plead for forgiveness. I was rude and violent."

"You are forgiven," she answered brightly. "And I hope we shall be friends!"

"Will you give me a flower?" he asked simply.

She laughed, and bending forward, broke off a rosebud from one of the climbing trees.

"You can have this, if you like," she said. "Take it quickly!"

He took it, his strong hands trembling as they touched hers. Then Gerald's bright young voice rang out from behind.

"Come on, Bryan, old chap, and see the gees."

He went away, and Lady Helen was left alone under the roses. She put down her book, and half-closed her eyes. It seemed to her that she had a good deal to think about. It was like a leaf out of a fairy tale. Her boor lover had become a hero!

CHAPTER IX

"WHO ARE YOU?"

A FEW days after the luncheon party at Wessemer Court, Bryan received an unexpected visit. He was returning from a walk to one of his farms, and was crossing the home field on his way to the Vicarage, when he saw a pair of the famous Wessemer carriage horses drawn up to his door, and Lord Wessemer stepping out from the brougham. As Gerald had been rabbit-shooting with him all the morning, and had not said a word about any visit from any member of the family, Bryan at first thought that he must be mistaken. But when he reached the ring fence and turned into the avenue, he saw Lord Wessemer standing upon his doorstep.

He walked swiftly up the drive, and arrived just in time to stop the carriage. Lord Wessemer stepped out, and the footman closed the door.

"I am fortunate," the Earl remarked as they shook hands. "I so seldom pay visits that it annoys me most unreasonably to find any one out."

"I'm glad I happened to see you," Bryan answered. "I thought I recognized your horses, so I hurried back. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you."

Bryan led the way into the library, wheeled an easy-chair to the fire, and rang the bell for tea.

"You learnt my weakness very early in our acquaintance,

Mr. Bryan," the Earl remarked. "I am particularly glad to have found you in. I want to have a little talk with you."

Bryan stood up on the hearthrug and bowed. During the last few months a wonderful self-possession and restraint had grown up within him. Lord Wessemer looked at him critically, studied his clothes, his bearing, and expression, and told himself finally that the man was a gentleman. There could not possibly be any doubt about it.

"I am sure you will not misunderstand what I am going to say," he began pleasantly. "At any rate you must give me credit for taking some considerable interest in you, or I should not be here at all. I am not one who, as a rule, concerns himself about his neighbour's business."

Bryan bowed. The Earl had looked at him as though expecting some remark, and there was nothing which it occurred to him to say.

"Gerald's narrative the other day," he continued, "was quite a little drama in its way. We are all intensely indebted to you for getting him out of such a scrape, and I am not going to weary you by talking about it. I know that that would only bore you."

Bryan made a little gesture of relief. In truth, he was sick of hearing it mentioned.

"Naturally every one has been talking a great deal about it, and after you left every one seemed to imagine that because they had met you at the Court, that I could tell them all about you. But, as you know, I was able to do nothing of the kind. Sir George Brankhurst told me that you snubbed him most unmercifully when he asked you a question about your family. Was that quite wise? Now understand me, Mr. Bryan! As Mr. Bryan you will always be very welcome indeed at Wessemer Court, but I should like other people ——"

"I do not care anything about society," Bryan interrupted calmly. "I have no desire to make acquaintances."

"But if you intend, as I presume you do, to take up a permanent residence here," Lord Wessemer continued, "you will sure find it more pleasant to be on cordial terms with your neighbours. The long and short of it is, that I have come to ask you, not for my own sake, but for yours, a blunt question. Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Bryan had drawn himself up to his full height, and his face had grown set and stern. He did not answer for a moment. His eyes seemed fascinated by that little streak of far-away moorland, of which he could just catch a glimpse through his uncurtained window. Then he turned towards Lord Wessemer.

"I am not sure that I know," he answered simply.

Lord Wessemer gave a slight but distinct start. Twice within a few days, this man, a past master in the nonchalance bred of custom and habit, had lost control of himself for a minute.

"You do not — know?" he repeated slowly.

"I do not. I wish that I did!" Bryan answered.

The Earl was silent. He looked steadily into the fire. His cheek seemed a little blanched, and the white hand which supported it shook slightly. Just at that moment a servant entered with the tea-tray. They were neither of them very sorry for the interruption.

In silence, Bryan did the honours of his little repast, and brought out the cigarettes. The man was dismissed as soon as possible. The Earl lit a cigarette with fingers which still shook a little, and sipped his second cup of tea absently.

"That is rather an extraordinary statement of yours, Mr. Bryan," he said at length.

"No doubt it sounds so," Bryan answered. "If you care

to hear as much of my history as I feel disposed to tell any one, I will tell it to you."

"I should like to hear it very much," Lord Wessemer answered.

Bryan finished his tea, and set down the cup. Then he lit a cigarette and commenced, still standing up and looking steadily out of the window.

"I don't think that I have a very good memory," he said. "Anyhow, I can't remember anything when I was very young. The first thing which I can recollect is the old farmhouse where I lived when I was a boy, and the man and woman to whom it belonged. I called them grandfather and grandmother, but I found out afterwards that they were not related to me in any way. I must have led them a fearful life, for I was a wild, harum-scarum boy, but they were very good to me. I went to an excellent school in the neighbouring town, or rather was supposed to, but I stayed away whenever I could, and went ferreting or rabbiting. They were very old people, and they were unfortunately very lenient with me. I did nearly what I liked. I grew up as I liked — and that was very badly. When I was about fourteen years old, they died. A Mr. Jameson, who has since died, but who was then agent of the nobleman who owned all the land round, came forward and declared himself my guardian. I was sent to live with some fresh people whom I did not like at all. Plenty of money was found for my maintenance and education, which I was given to understand had been left me by my grandparents. I had only to ask for anything in reason and I got it, but I am free to confess that at that time I was a vagabond. I ran away from every place I was sent to. I built a hut of my own, and insisted upon living in it. Mr. Jameson did all he could to induce me to settle down with any of the farmers around, but I declined. Soon I got such a bad name that none of

them would have had me. The history of my life from fourteen to twenty is simply a record of vagabondage, poaching, and fighting!

"As I grew up, I am happy to say, I changed a little. I became curious to know whether the old people with whom I first lived were really my grandparents, and who I really was. As to the first, I was soon satisfied. I discovered that they were not related to me in any way. But as to the second, it was a different affair. I had been brought to them quite young, and they had given out some time before that they were going to adopt the child of a distant relative. No one knew by whom I had been brought to them, or where I was born. The money, Mr. Jameson told me, was mine, and he showed me a will signed by my reputed grandparents, leaving it to me. I could discover nothing else about myself.

"One night, when I was in my hut alone, there came a knock at the door. A drunken man was outside, and I let him in out of the rain. He asked me, amongst a lot of incoherent questions, whether I was not the boy who had been brought up by the old people at Weldon's farm. I answered eagerly 'yes,' and hoped that now at last I was going to hear something. He was so drunk, however, that I could get nothing out of him. In the end I gave him a shakedown, and left him till morning, hoping that he would then be able to tell me all I wanted to know. But when the morning came, his place was empty. He had stolen away!"

Bryan paused for a moment, and relit his cigarette which had gone out. With the match between his fingers, he glanced towards Lord Wessemer. His face was in the shadow, but he was evidently deeply interested.

"I hunted that man like a bloodhound," Bryan continued. "In London I lost him. I drew money from Mr. Jameson, and I went to a detective agency. After months

of delay I found out something definite. He had sailed for New York. I went to Mr. Jameson again, and told him that I was going gold-digging. He advanced me all the money I asked for, and I left England for New York. At New York I found out, after infinite pains, that he had gone to San Francisco. I followed!"

"And — did you find him?"

"I did, and I did not!" Bryan answered. "I worked with him on a gold-mine for months without recognizing him. He died there, and a bundle of letters came into my hands. They told me a little — not much — of my mother, and a little more of my father. But they only told me their Christian names. Afterwards, some other letters came into my hands which had been deposited in San Francisco, but some document which was supposed to be with them was missing. They came to me under painful circumstances, and I did not examine them at the time!"

"Do you expect ever to get it?" Lord Wessemer asked.

"Yes," Bryan answered; "I do! I have an idea that some day it will come to me!"

Then there was a long silence — broken at last by Lord Wessemer. He had risen to his feet, and was holding out his hand.

"I thank you for your confidence, Mr. Bryan!" he said quietly. "I shall not betray it. Of course you know that Mr. Jameson was my agent?"

"Yes," Bryan answered. "I know that. I lived on your land, scarcely twenty miles away. You were always abroad."

"Yes!"

The two men shook hands. Looking closely into his visitor's face, Bryan was struck with its intense deathly pallor. His skin, too, seemed drawn, and there were lines

under his eyes. He seemed to have the look of a much older man.

"I am afraid that you have found this room too hot," Bryan remarked. "You don't look well."

"I have found it very comfortable, thank you," Lord Wessemer answered. "Good afternoon, Mr. Bryan. Come to Wessemer Court whenever you will! You will always be welcome."

His tone had a note of sincerity in it which appealed to Bryan. He shook hands with his guest, and walked with him to the hall door.

"I shall come very soon," he said simply. "If you don't mind my lack of identity, I shall be glad to come."

He watched the carriage drive off, thoughtfully. The blinds were half drawn, and no one could see inside; no one could see the Earl of Wessemer, philosopher, diplomatist, and Epicurean, lying back in his carriage with white, stricken face, and half-closed eyes. He had received a blow!

CHAPTER X

LIKE BAFFLED BREAKERS AGAINST AN IRON SHORE

Before Lord Wessemer's carriage was well out of sight, Bryan had caught up his cap, and was off towards the Vicarage. He crossed the home field, a strip of the moor, and strode down the deep country lane to where the old yellow stone house lay back behind a high yew hedge. He avoided the front door, and crossing the lawn, entered softly by the garden gate, and made his way into the drawing-room.

There was only one little rose-shaded lamp to illumine the long, low room, full of quaint recesses and shadowy corners, and at first he thought that the tall, slim figure seated by Miss Bettesford's side was a stranger's. But as he crossed the room towards them, he saw who it was, and his heart gave a strong, wild beat. He was thankful then for the dim light. No one could see the flush which had crept into his bronzed cheek, or the light which was flashing in his eyes.

He shook hands with Miss Bettesford, and bowed to Lady Helen, who welcomed him graciously.

"I had almost given you up, Bryan," Miss Bettesford said, with an unconscious note of reproach in her tone. "Will you ring the bell and have some fresh tea made? I am afraid this is quite cold."

"No, thanks," he answered. "I'm sorry, but I had a visitor, and I had to give him some tea. I should have been

here an hour and a half ago, but he just came in as I was leaving. He only went ten minutes ago."

"Was it Lord Wessemer?" Raymond asked. "His carriage went by just now, and Lady Helen was wondering where it had been to."

Bryan nodded a little absently. He was watching Miss Bettesford with some concern. She was paler even than usual, to-day, and her eyes were bright and feverish. She was looking into the fire, but she appeared to be listening.

"Yes, it was Lord Wessemer," he said.

Lady Helen leaned forward, with slightly arched eyebrows.

"Really!" she exclaimed. "You ought to consider yourself very much favoured, Mr. Bryan. Lord Wessemer is not fond of paying calls."

"He was very kind," Bryan answered indifferently. "Let me arrange your cushions," he went on, bending over Miss Bettesford. "There! Isn't that better? I'm afraid you're not quite so well to-day!"

She leaned back in her invalid's chair, and looked up at him gratefully out of her soft, dark eyes.

"Thank you, Bryan," she said. "I think I'm about the same as usual. A little tired to-day, perhaps."

"I wonder if I have been talking too much?" Lady Helen asked, passing her cup to Bryan. "I believe I have! I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, no! I have enjoyed listening to you!" Miss Bettesford assured her with a faint smile. "It was very good of you to come! You never tire me! Raymond likes me to have visitors. He thinks it rouses me, and takes my attention away from myself!"

"I'm sure of it," Raymond remarked. "You get awfully dull if you haven't some one to amuse you. I'm such an old stick myself!"

"I wish we could induce you to try a complete change, and come up to the Court," Lady Helen said. "We have a very comfortable low carriage, and some quiet ponies — you wouldn't be jolted a bit. Don't you think it would do her good, Mr. Bryan?"

"I believe it would!" he answered.

She shook her head. There was a strange, sad look in her face.

"No. I think not!" she said, in a low tone. "It must be — twenty years since I was at Wessemer Court!"

"Twenty years!" Lady Helen exclaimed. "Twenty years! And here you are within half a mile of our front door! It is perfectly scandalous! You really must come. Now, please make up your mind, and tell me when I may send for you. You shall come at your own time, and stay just as long as you like! Shall we say to-morrow — early in the afternoon?"

Miss Bettesford shook her head.

"I shall never come, Helen!" she said simply. "Don't think me unkind! It would be impossible! That is all!"

There was a moment's silence; and in that silence one of those three who sat round the fire felt a strange thrill of wonder flash through his brain. It was not easy to tell what had suggested it — something, perhaps, in her manner, or, more likely still, some magnetic instinct born of the strange sympathy there was between those two. As swiftly as it had come, he cast it from him. It was impossible — utterly, wholly impossible! Yet, even while he scouted it, there came a swift, picture-like recollection of that strange meeting which he had witnessed in this very room only a few days back. The conviction settled down upon him like a thunderclap. There was some bond between these two: this frail, delicate woman, beautiful even in these her later years, and the Earl of Wessemer. A bond! No,

not that perhaps, but some common knowledge of a curtained past, something which drew them together, and yet must keep them for ever apart. What was it? A dozen wild conjectures rushed through his mind before he could command his will sufficiently to set his heel down upon all those suspicions which seemed unworthy of her. Surely the very shadow of evil could never touch her. She was to him, with her pale, delicate beauty, and soft speech, the very embodiment of dainty feminine refinement, that most attractive and fascinating attribute of the women into whose world he was passing. Apart from this, apart from that curious affection which certainly had grown up between them, his very instincts revolted against these vague speculations. The thought which had found its way into his brain vanished when he looked at her, like breath from a mirror.

There had been a short silence. Something in Miss Bettesford's manner had forbidden any attempt at shaking her resolution. Even Lady Helen's polite little speech of regret died away upon her lips. Soon she got up and said that she must go.

"We have been chattering away so that I quite forgot the time!" she declared. "It is almost dark now."

"The boys will walk across the park with you," Miss Bettesford said, as she shook hands with her visitor.

"It really is not necessary!" Lady Helen protested.

"On the contrary, I think it is very necessary!" Raymond said, smiling. "Only I am afraid that I shall have to depute Bryan to be sole escort. I have some accounts to go through with my school manager, and here he comes."

Bryan did not say anything, but he picked up his cap, and stood by her side. Lady Helen looked at him doubtfully.

"I really don't think that I need trouble you, Mr.

Bryan," she said. "I am quite sure that I know the way, and there is never anybody in the park."

"I will come — if you don't mind," he said bluntly.

She made no further objection, and he followed her out into the garden, and through the little swing-gate opposite which led into the park. Side by side they walked together across the smooth, short turf. He was silent for a few minutes, walking with his hands behind his back, and every now and then watching her covertly. Her manner had none of the implied graciousness of a few days ago; he could almost have imagined that those few minutes in the conservatory had been a dream. But he did not lose courage.

"You see the education of the boor is in its first stage, Lady Helen," he said.

She looked at him, with a faint smile at the corner of her lips.

"I should have said that it had passed the first stage," she replied. "You have learnt a good many things even since we met at Weldon's farm."

"I have had some inducement to learn," he answered quietly.

She frowned.

"You did not tell me then of the alteration in your fortunes," she said. "You must have made a good deal of money in California!"

"I have a partner who makes it for me," he answered. "He is one of the best fellows in the world — and certainly one of the most honest. Some day I should like to tell you all about him."

She bowed her head slightly, without evincing any particular interest.

"You see a good deal of the Bettesfords, don't you?" she remarked, after a brief pause.

"Yes. Raymond Bettesford has been polishing me up," he said. "We read together every morning. I really had some sort of an education, and it is coming back to me — slowly."

"You are a most mysterious being!" she declared. "I could not have believed that it was possible for any one to have altered as you have done!"

He leant over towards her earnestly. They were passing through a little grove of pines, whose motionless branches were standing out dark and rigid, almost as though they were painted on the gray sky. There was no sound anywhere, save their own footfall upon the soft turf and fallen cones.

"It is not wonderful to me, when I think of the incentive," he said slowly. "I don't know whether that is quite the right word, but I think so. I mean that there has been something in my heart — just a hope, a spark of hope, not much else — which has driven me on like the west wind is driven over the moorland. There is nothing that can stop it. Nothing ever can stop it!"

She turned a darkened face upon him. It was better for him, she had decided, that she should harden herself altogether.

"I do not understand you," she said slowly. "I do not think that you know yourself what you are talking about. The motive of your evolution is nothing to me. I am glad for your own sake that you have enough ambition to try and fit yourself for a different position in life. That is all."

He stopped in the middle of the path, and, quite involuntarily, she did the same. They stood for a moment face to face: Lady Helen proud, calm, and impassive; Bryan, his strongly marked features all aglow, and his eyes bright with the fire of his purpose.

"I do not think you mean that," he said. "You do un-

derstand, you must understand, that desire which is as the breath of my body to me. Mind, it was not I who spoke of it to-day. It was you. I am in no hurry. I know that my time has not yet come. But I shall wait, and I shall hope."

She hurried along, with an angry tinge of colour in her cheeks, and a superb disdain in every movement. Bryan kept his eyes fixed upon her, and he ground his teeth. Surely she was the most beautiful of all proud women.

"You are talking folly," she said scornfully. "I should be very sorry to damp any of your most laudable desires, but if you persist in these enigmatic assertions, I shall cease to regard you in any other light than as a complete stranger. Your common sense ought to tell you how ridiculous it is to talk like that to me. I consider it an unwarrantable presumption!"

There was a light flashing for a moment in his eyes and across his face, which it was well that she could not see.

"I will answer you out of one of the books which the men and the women of your world often quote," he answered. "I read yesterday that the meanest man has a right to love the proudest lady, if only he does so with respect and sincerity. You may be the proudest lady, Lady Helen — I do not think that there are many prouder than you — but I am not the meanest man, and, with all possible respect — I love you!"

She drew her skirts into her hand, and flashed an angry, scornful glance upon him. He was not in the least abashed.

"Insolent!" she exclaimed. "I confess that you are a complete disappointment to me, Mr. Bryan. I felt some interest in you on account of your determined efforts to improve yourself and your position, and because of your kindness to my brother. I was disposed to be on friendly terms with you, and the result is that you persist in talking like a

lunatic. You are hopeless. I prefer to go the rest of the way by myself, please. Kindly leave me!"

"At that gate," he answered, pointing a little further on. "I promise not to speak another word until we get there."

She hesitated, but he had evidently not the slightest intention of leaving her. She could see that in his set face and firmly-drawn lips. So she yielded, a little annoyed with herself for doing so.

He kept his compact, and walked by her side in silence to the gate. As he held it open their eyes met. His strong face showed no signs of despair, or even disappointment. On the contrary, his eyes met hers frankly, and he smiled as he raised his cap. For a moment her heart failed her. His calm doggedness, the air of conscious and innate strength which seemed typified in his iron lips and vigorous face, almost frightened her. He had gained so much, so vigorously, and so powerfully. The ragged poacher, the vagabond and pest of the village stood before her, the owner of a beautiful home, well dressed, possessed of at least an average share of *savoir faire*, calm and confident. In her heart she knew quite well that all unwittingly the seed had been of her own sowing, and for the first time she felt a certain fear, almost dislike, of him. The will which had accomplished all these things must soon be at war with hers. There could be but one ending possible, and yet she shrank from the contest.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GULF

A COUNTY which had the reputation of ultra exclusiveness, determined, with a unanimity which was really remarkable, to waive all its prejudices in favour of Mr. Bryan Bryan, of the Old Hall. It was odd how it all came about. With the women the fact that Bryan was a bachelor, a man of striking appearance, and had the reputation of marvellous wealth, no doubt had something to do with it. With the men, the Earl of Wessemer's friendship, and his own qualities, stood him in more need. Bryan, in all that he said or did, was perfectly natural, good-natured, and yet strikingly self-reliant; added to which he was a deadly shot, a magnificent rider, and a good all-round sportsman. The resources of the Old Hall were speedily added to, and he soon found himself, when it was required (and that was not seldom), able to give his men callers an excellent luncheon and some capital wine. Sir George Brankhurst, the M.F.H., acting upon a hint from Lord Wessemer, called a few days after the luncheon party at Wessemer Court, and a week or two later the hounds met at the Old Hall. Bryan's hospitality was unlimited, and for the first time he saw Lady Helen, with a curiously deep thrill, beneath his roof. From that day there was no longer any question as to his position, but there remained a large share of curiosity. His antecedents were

completely mythical. Nobody seemed to know anything whatever about them.

His sudden plunge into a society to which he was altogether unaccustomed did not affect Bryan in the slightest. He soon became on pleasant terms with the men with whom he was brought into contact, but so far as possible he remained aloof from, if he did not actually avoid, the women. Some time during the day he always spent with Raymond Bettesford, and it was very seldom indeed that he was missing from the Vicarage drawing-room at dusk.

It was half-past four, and, after many glances at the tiny clock, Miss Bettesford had rung for tea, and sent to his study for Raymond. But the tray was scarcely moved up to her side, and the lamp lit, when the little lane outside seemed to be shaken with the clattering hoofs of a galloping horse. They heard a familiar voice giving a few orders to a groom, and in a moment or two Bryan, splashed with mud from head to foot, stood in the low doorway.

"May I come in?" he asked in his deep bass voice. "I am a very pillar of mud!"

Miss Bettesford looked up smiling. She always smiled when Bryan came.

"Of course you may," she answered. "Do you want to wash?"

"Not a bit of good," he answered, undoing the cord from his tall hat, all ruffled and scratched, and setting it down upon a table. "The wind has dried it all on. I'll wait till I get home and can have a bath."

He let himself carefully down into one of the low wicker chairs, and looked distrustfully at the teapot. Miss Bettesford followed his eyes, and laughed outright.

"I had given you up, and ordered the small one," she explained. "Jane, make some more tea, and tell cook to cut some sandwiches."

"And a breakfast-cup," Raymond put in. "I know a starving man when I see one. Give him something to start with, Auntie."

Bryan laughed as he took his tea and doubled up his bread-and-butter.

"We've had a glorious day," he said; "but hounds took us right into the forest country, and I never got my second horse at all. Just picked him up on the way home, not a mile from here. I made sure of being at Longton Spinnies, and John had my sandwich-case. Hence this voracity."

"Did you kill?" she asked.

"Yes, twenty miles from home, and the Lord only knows where!" Bryan answered. "It was a strange country to every one of us. I've nearly killed my horse, I'm afraid. Was ever anything in the world so good as this tea, I wonder?"

They talked about the run and the people who were there for a few minutes, and then Raymond got up.

"I must go and see old Mrs. Elwick," he said. "Coming down to-morrow morning, Bryan?"

"Would you mind coming up to me?" Bryan asked, holding out his empty cup. "Delagood and Captain Hawkesworth are coming over to lunch, and there are one or two more men likely to drop in. I thought if you could get up at about eleven, we could have an hour to ourselves."

"All right," Raymond answered. "I like your luncheon parties. No ladies coming, are there?"

"No, I don't entertain ladies," Bryan answered drily.

Raymond went out, and Bryan and Miss Bettesford were left alone. He finished his tea, and lit a cigarette. It was understood that this was always to be done.

Bryan had been looking thoughtfully in the fire, and the silence between them had lasted for some time. Suddenly he looked up, and found her eyes fixed steadily upon him.

"Bryan," she said softly, "I was wondering a little at the tone of your last speech. Are you a woman-hater?"

He took her thin white hand into his, and stroked it tenderly.

"Are not you a woman?" he said.

She laughed quietly, and looked at him with soft, dim eyes.

"I am an old woman, Bryan; and it is not of old women that I was thinking."

"Old!" he repeated, with gentle scorn.

"Old enough to be your mother, Bryan! I am thankful for it. I would not be a year younger, a year further away from the end. But never mind that. Tell me. They say that you never seem to care about talking to any of the girls round here. Lady Brankhurst got positively indignant about it the other day. She has eight daughters, and she thinks you ought to marry."

There was no answer. Bryan had risen to his feet, and was standing upon the hearthrug. Miss Bettesford abandoned her half-playful tone, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Bryan," she said earnestly, "I have sometimes wondered — is your heart quite so hard as people think? Is there not some one — whom you think of a good deal; some one ——"

He looked down at her. The lines in his face had suddenly relaxed. Then, with a quick impulse, he dropped down on one knee and took both her hands in his.

"May I tell you?" he said, his deep voice a little unsteady. "I should like to; I think it would do me good."

She laid her hand caressingly on his clustering wind-tossed hair, and smoothed it.

"Yes, tell me," she whispered. "I should like to hear everything!"

He drew a deep breath. The strong, deep passion of the man was working itself out between the lines of his story.

"I was a vagabond when I was a boy," he said. "I have told you that already. No one could do anything with me. I poached, drank, swore, and did all manner of evil. One day I saved a little girl's life. She was kind to me. I had never seen anything like her, and I thought she was an angel. When I heard who she was, I cursed. She was a lady, and I — was a vagabond. There was a great gulf between us. That night I got drunk, but on the morrow I lay all day on the hills, looking at the great house where she lived, and I made a resolution. I would turn over a new leaf. I would throw myself headlong into that gulf, and I would come out on the other side."

"Poor boy," she whispered, "poor boy! Was there no one to look after you?"

"Not a soul! My mother must either have died, or she must have been a very wicked woman. I ——"

"Don't, please don't!"

Bryan looked down in surprise. She had stopped him with a sharp little cry of pain.

"I — I don't like to hear you speak harshly of her," she said, with a little shudder. "You do not know! She may not have been to blame!"

Her white, pleading face checked the reply which had risen to his lips. He could not bear to give her pain.

"That may be so," he answered. "Anyhow, I was brought up by an old couple who were notoriously not related to me. I had money when I chose to fetch it, but not one friend; no one to encourage me; not a soul to sympathize with me! It was very lonely in those days."

"My poor boy!"

"Well, a drunken man came reeling into my cottage one night, and he let fall some hints which set me all on fire. He

told me, in his incoherent way, that he knew who I was; and to know that seemed to me to be the first step towards fortune. In the morning he had stolen away; but I followed him all over the world. I did not succeed altogether, and yet I succeeded in part. But I found gold, and I found an honest partner. You know all that part of the story. But there is a part of my life in California which you do not know, and which, God help me, I must tell you!"

His face had grown suddenly white and strained. Worse than anything else upon the earth, or under the earth, he dreaded the wildly sweet memory of those days of his bondage.

"Never mind, Bryan," she whispered, "I shall not judge you hardly. Good God! I shall not judge you at all!"

"So long as you do not turn me away, and tell me not to come here any more, I shall feel better for having told you," he said. "San Francisco is a wild, evil place, and the men there lead wild, evil lives. There was — a girl. She was in trouble, and I helped her. She came to me — if it had not been me it would have been some one else — and — and she lived with me. It was a strange, wonderful time. She was beautiful, and in a way — I think — I am afraid — I must have loved her! She was not wicked. She had been cruelly treated. Her beauty was marvellous. It fascinated me; it seemed to corrupt my very soul! It was what I had sworn should never happen — and it happened! But there came a time when I loathed myself. One night I woke up, I dreamed that she — had seen me! I got up and dressed quietly, and hurried away. I left half my money behind, and I fled. That day I went to the gold-diggings. I thought that I was safe there, but I was not. She loved me, and she followed me. She followed across the burning plains and the wild, bare desert; a week's journey, and no human soul with her; she who hated the darkness, and was

frightened at a shadow. What could I do? God! what could I do? We left the place together, and in the desert she saved my life. She had scarcely fired a pistol in her life, yet she shot the man through the heart who tried to kill me! I had a fever. She nursed me through it. She took me, almost dying, to her rooms at San Francisco, and she sold her jewels and the clothes from her back to buy food and wine for me. And when I cried out to come to England, she sold herself, and it was with her money that I came! Oh, God!"

He wiped the drops of perspiration from his burning forehead. Death itself would have seemed less bitter than this.

"My poor boy!"

It was all she said, but it soothed him.

"You do not utterly despise me?" he faltered.

"Despise you — no! And she — how good she was to you!"

"Yes; she was good to me — too good! And I have been a vile brute! Sometimes now — at nights, or when I am riding alone, I fancy I see her in San Francisco, looking across the ocean, looking for me with her dark, sad eyes. Ah!"

"Poor girl!" she whispered. "What was her name?"

"Myra!"

"Poor Myra! My poor boy!"

There was a long silence. The touch of her fingers upon his hair seemed to soothe him. Gradually he grew calmer.

"Tell me — about the English girl. Have you seen her?"

He drew himself out of her arms, and looked at her steadily.

"You have not guessed, then?"

"No!"

She looked at him with a sudden blanching of her own

cheeks. One hand she pressed against her heart. She felt that she was on the verge of a shock.

"It is Lady Helen!" he said. "Do you think that I am mad?"

She leaned back in her chair, and a sudden ashen pallor spread itself over her face. He was alarmed, and would have rung or called for help, but her fingers detained him. In a moment she reopened her eyes.

"Lady Helen!" she repeated. "That is what brought you here to live, then?"

"Yes! I suppose I am a fool, but I must fulfil my destiny. My folly has made me what I am. I must follow it."

The sorrowing light of an ineffable pity shone in her delicate face.

"Bryan," she whispered. "Does she know?"

"Yes," he answered. "She knows!"

"She has not encouraged you?"

"No; the time is not ripe for that, yet."

"My poor, poor boy!"

He leaned forward again.

"Don't you think there is any chance for me?" he said hoarsely.

She shook her head.

"I think that there is no chance," she answered. "Lady Helen is, of all the Wessemers I ever knew, the proudest. She will never be able to forget what you were. She will never marry you. She has not soul enough to appreciate what you have done. She is a Wessemer, body, and blood, and soul, and they are a cruel race. My poor boy!"

He stood up, and lifted his clenched fists above his head so that they struck the ceiling. A little cry of pain broke from his lips.

"I must have her!" he said. "My desire for her is the very salt of my life. I will have her! Perhaps," he added,

" perhaps the lawyers who are working for me in London may find out the truth about myself. They may find that there is a name which I have a right to, perhaps a good one. Surely she would forget the past then. You think so, don't you? "

He turned towards her eagerly, but she was lying back in her chair with half-closed eyes. She had no answer to give him, save that little moan which stole from between her white lips like the cry of a soul in agony. He leant down and caught her hand. It was cold and lifeless. Her eyes were closed. For a little while he could torture her no more. She had fainted!

CHAPTER XII

THE SUNLIGHT OF HOPE

For the third time in succession Bryan turned away with darkened face from the Vicarage door, without having seen Miss Bettesford. She was too ill to come down, she had sent word — too ill to see any one. For more than an hour he had watched Lord Wessemer's carriage waiting in the narrow lane outside the gate; had seen the Earl himself come out, walking with bowed head and unsteady gait, and be driven rapidly away. Yet, when he himself, a few minutes later, walked into the little drawing-room, and sent up a message to her, together with a great bunch of Parma violets which he had ridden twenty miles to fetch, she was too ill to see him. She was not coming down.

He turned away with a curious pain at his heart, and setting his teeth, strode away towards the open country. It was a gray, windy afternoon, and a salt breeze was blowing in from the sea, filling the air with moisture, and carrying the white spray in little clouds far inland across the rolling moors. He faced the wind and walked against it, finding a certain vague relief in the strong gusts which forced him to put out his strength to subdue them, and in the deep gullies over which he leaped with unseeing recklessness. It was a gray afternoon indeed. Never had he been so near the bitter black waters of despair, never had all that

he had gained seemed so little and of so small avail. For the first time he thought of those days in California with a distinct and certain regret. Never had that wild freedom of body and soul seemed so attractive to him. A touch of the old vagabondage stole into his blood. He longed to tear off his well-fitting tweed shooting-suit, and to go in rags, to drink, laugh, shout, sleep in the open air with the moon to watch through the trees at night, and the sun to call him up at dawn. He thought of the Blue River, the morning plunges into the deep cool waters, the great snow-capped mountains set in violet dawnlight, of the hard physical toil, and the excitement of gold-finding. Wild visions of Myra, with her dark glowing beauty and strange, wild grace, flashed across his mind. He cried out her name, and the wind bore it away behind him. At that moment he longed for her, longed for her to twine her arms around his neck, and cover his face with her passionate kisses. He was a fool not to have stayed with her! He was a fool not to have forgotten this fair, proud girl, in whose sight he was but as the ashes and dust beneath her feet. And this other woman had loved him. She had given her life, and more than her life, for his sake. The utter barbarous brutality of his desertion of her came back to him with a rush. He saw the agony in her white face, and the unconscious reproach in her dark, dim eyes. Well he was paying for his folly, for his wickedness. To-day, his present, his whole environment seemed like a dream. He was Bryan Bryan, of Wessemer Old Hall, no longer. It was unreal, thin, intangible! He had made a fool's blunder. The best thing he could do would be to take the next boat to New York, to seek out Myra and make her happy, and live amongst the men and women who would never ask him who he was and whence he came. He was out of his place here. He had no right ever to have taken the hand of that sweet-faced, gentle woman, whose delicate

purity he had outraged by his presence and his confession. He would never see her again. It was not likely that she would care to see him. She knew him now for what he was, and she despised him! Better ——

His heart gave a mighty leap, and for just a moment, trees and sky spun round before his eyes. Of all persons in the world, the one whom he least expected to see was coming up the hillside towards him.

He folded his arms, and leaned against a rock, waiting for her coming, unconsciously forming a striking picture against the empty background of sky and air. She looked up, and, seeing him ahead, half hesitated. That moment seemed to him as though it would never end; in reality, her hesitation was very brief indeed. She came on towards him, calling to the dogs by which she was surrounded, and then greeting him with a movement of her head more imperious than gracious.

"Have you seen Gerald?" she called out, pausing a few yards away. "I thought they were shooting over here, but I haven't heard a gun."

He had taken off his cap, and stood with it in his hand. The wild disquiet of a few minutes ago seemed to have passed away like a dream. At no time had he felt more confidence in himself than he felt in the first glow of this sudden reaction from the depths of despair.

"Gerald had lunch with me," he answered. "He was going to meet Hamilton and another man — Dixon, I think — at Welby turn, and then they were going to shoot over the Welby turnips, and home across the moor. I should think that they would be here in an hour."

She stooped and patted one of the dogs carelessly.

"No sport for you to-day, Tony," she said. "Gerald couldn't find Tony when he started, so I promised that I would bring him if I could. But I can't wait an hour."

She stood still for a moment, looking at the view. Then she called the dogs together.

"May I walk with you a little way?" he asked.

She looked at him, and understood. A woman is quick at such things. Despite her self-control, which was immense, and her natural coldness, her heart beat a shade faster. And yet how ridiculous it was! Perhaps it would be best to let him speak, and to give him such an answer as must silence him for ever.

"If you like," she answered indifferently. "I thought you were going the other way, and I was going to ask you to take Tony."

"I will take him back with pleasure, if you will let me come a little way with you first," he said.

She made no answer, and they walked along the broad, rough path together, and passed through a gate into a small plantation. Half-way through it there was another gate. Bryan laid his hand upon it, and stopped.

"I have something to say to you, Lady Helen," he began. "Do you mind waiting here for a minute? I will not keep you very long."

She waited with unmoved face and perfectly calm, but after a moment her eyes fell from his. The fire was too bright for her. In a perfectly mechanical fashion she found herself examining the brown shapely hand which still rested upon the gate. So she stood listening whilst he spoke, his deep bass voice trembling a little now and then, but his manner governed by a wonderful self-restraint. There was nothing which suggested how near indeed he was to despair.

"Lady Helen, I have waited for some time; I can wait no longer! Things have gone awry with me! An hour ago, I had almost made up my mind to go back to my old life!"

"Back to your old life!" she repeated. "What nonsense!"

"Ay, it may seem so!" he answered. "You must remember that I dwell alone; I am a lonely man. Except for one thing, I should be happier in a simpler life. When that thing seems very far off I get weary. I have built my life up on that hope. You know what it is! I don't ask for too much now. I only ask for just a word of hope to carry home with me, and to chase the dark shadows of my solitude away. Just a single word!"

He paused for a moment, as though to give her the opportunity of speech. But she did not say anything. She had pictured this scene to herself once or twice lately, regarding it always as inevitable. But it was not turning out quite as she had imagined. She preferred to remain silent.

"I want to tell you everything, just in a few words. I want you to have it all before you," he continued. "It is true that I was a vagabond when I saw you first; wild, shiftless, and passionate. I had no one to look after me; no one to care whether I lived or died, or what became of me! I saw you, and I worshipped you. You filled my whole heart; you became my life. I left my cottage, and lay by night under the trees that I might hear the wind sigh through their branches and whisper your name, and then I would close my eyes and fancy that I saw you coming through the shadows up the glade, or across the meadows. By night and day I watched your house. At first I was content with your kind words, and — forgive me! — patronizing notice. But as years went on, my heart became the heart of a man, and the boy's dream grew into a man's passion. I became ambitious. The gulf between us was broad and deep, but I devoted my whole life, my every energy, to bridging it. I began to make plans, and from the lips of a drunken man I learnt the possibility of gaining for myself a name and position to which I had a right. And so I crossed the ocean to search for it, and, alas, I failed! But I

"'I want just one little word of hope!'"

made a fortune which day by day grows larger. Lady Helen, I have begun to fear that nameless I came into the world, and nameless I must go out of it! But I have ambitions. I am rich, and you have seen for yourself that the people here have been content to take me for what I am. I mean to go into Parliament, and I mean to make a name for myself greater by far than the name I have lost! I can never be worthy of you — no one ever could; but at least you shall never be ashamed of your husband, and — I love you! If only I had words to tell you how much, how you have lived in my dreams, how you fill my whole world! There is nothing in the world worth having for me but your love. I meant to have waited longer; but this afternoon, when I saw you, I was heart-sick and weary. I was almost convinced that I am a fool to be here. Everything was darkness and bitterness. Then you came, and I knew that I must speak to you. I don't ask for too much. I want just one little word of hope!"

He ceased, and Lady Helen too was silent. It was all utterly different to what she had expected. All traces of that former boorishness had fallen away from him. He had spoken, indeed, with a quiet eloquence which had found its way to her heart. She was shaken and agitated as she had never been before in her life, and had never dreamed of being. Least of all had she supposed that in this man's presence her heart would beat, and her power of speech falter. She had imagined herself calm and collected, and him nervously incoherent, perhaps violent. And there he stood before her, silent and manly, and she — was neither calm nor collected. It was true that there was a passion in his bright eyes and glowing face, a passion which had rung, too, in his voice. But it was the passion which dignifies.

"I am sorry," she said at last, raising her gray eyes slowly to his. "I do not care for you — in that way. I do

not think that I ever should. I do not think it would be right of me to give you any word of hope."

He made no gesture, nor did he wince. Her face had softened to him as it had never done before, and he was fully conscious of it. He remained silent, and waited. And as he stood there, a long shaft of yellow light from westward smote the tops of the trees above them, and fell across the dry, brown undergrowth at their feet. They both glanced up at the rift in the sky, and their eyes met again.

"You have been very frank with me," she said; "I will try to be the same with you. You must not mind if it hurts! Nothing can be so good as the truth. You must please remember that I am not a woman of impulse, or," she continued hesitatingly, "of over-much imagination. I really don't think that I have very much heart. On the other hand, I know that I am what people call proud. I have not thought much about marriage; but if I do marry, the man must be at least of equal position to my own. I should want to take the lead in society rather than follow, and I should require my husband to have a career. As to marrying a man without a name, I do not think that I could do it. It is possible, as you say, that if I were to love any one very much, I might alter. But I do not love any one and I cannot imagine myself loving any one sufficiently to make such a sacrifice. Do you know," she added, looking up at him frankly, "I think you have imagined me to be a very different person from what I really am. You have thought about me a good deal, and you have built up a Lady Helen in your thoughts not at all like me. You are rather a dreamer. I am very matter-of-fact. Even if I felt differently about it, it would still be impossible, for I could not marry without Lord Wessemer's consent, and he would never give it in your case. Let us consider all this as over, and be friends."

Curiously enough, he was not disappointed. She had

listened to him with patience; she had spoken kindly. It was the first step, he told himself. Besides, he had seen a new look in her face, a more womanly one than it had ever worn before, and he was far from despair.

"You do not love me, but you do not love any one else!" he said, with a curious little tremor in his tone, almost of exultation. "I am content to wait. It will come. I do not believe that you are heartless! Helen, my love, my dear love, it will come! I can wait! No, you need not shrink back. I shall not touch you till you give yourself to me of your own free will. Some day you will forget that I am nameless, for you will love me. Farewell!"

A sudden warmth had stolen to her heart. More than one man had asked her to marry him, but none had ever spoken to her like this. The man's very daring seemed to fascinate her. She could not escape from his eyes, and she felt herself curiously, yet in a manner pleasantly, moved.

"You must not call me such names!" she said, with an effort at iciness. "You must not speak to me like that!"

He bowed before her. A wonderful tact seemed to be prompting him exactly how far he might go.

"You need not fear," he said softly. "This moment I claim for my own; but the future shall be yours. You shall be Lady Helen to me then. But now I am your lover, and you are Helen, my dearest Helen!"

His fingers closed like a vise upon her hand, and before she could prevent it he had raised it to his lips. She could feel his burning kiss through her thick glove; but strangely enough she was not angry. He was master of the situation, and she seemed content that he should be so. It was all very strange. He stooped, and picked up Tony, and held the gate open for her. She passed through without a word. She did not look at him again, or speak. And Bryan strode

back across the moor, and wondered whether the first part of his walk had been a dream, until his eyes fell upon the distant outline of the little old-fashioned Vicarage. Then his heart sank again.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BITTER WATERS MADE SWEET

"At last they have let me in! Why —— !"

Bryan stopped short in the middle of the low drawing-room. His sentence terminated with that little shocked exclamation. He felt that it might not be wise to be too much affected by the change he saw in her face. But she concluded it for him.

"You think — that I have altered! It is true! I have grown older — years older since last week! You see! Even my hands are thinner!"

He drew up a footstool close to her side, and smoothed the delicate white fingers in his. All his vague resentment at her seclusion was gone. In a dim sort of way he understood something of what she must have gone through. Her hair was white, and her cheeks hollower and more blanched. The lustre had gone from her eyes. All that dainty sprightliness which had seemed to keep her young and gay in spite of her fragile health and years, had died away. He was shocked at the change in her.

"I am glad you came!" she said. "I am alone. Raymond has gone out."

"I have been every day," he answered. "I was afraid that you did not want me any more."

Her eyes filled with tears. She laid her hand gently upon his.

"It was not that, Bryan," she said softly. "It was not that, indeed!"

He drew a deep sigh of relief.

"I made sure of seeing you yesterday," he said. "You had another visitor."

She looked at him with an anxious face, and sighed.

"Yes, Lord Wessemer was here. I sent for him. I — I had business. Let me give you some tea."

She bent over the tray, but her fingers were trembling so that she nearly dropped the sugar tongs. He stretched out his hand and imprisoned hers.

"Let me make the tea," he said. "I can do it. See!"

She leaned back with a faint smile, and he filled her cup and put it down beside her. Then he helped himself and sat at her feet, looking thoughtfully out across the little strip of lawn and the yew hedge to where the twilight was settling down upon the moor.

"Bryan!" she said softly. "Something has happened to you. There is a new look upon your face. What is it?"

He did not dream of evading her question. He answered her simply and at once.

"I saw Lady Helen — yesterday afternoon."

"And — and you told her!"

"Yes. I told her."

"Look at me, Bryan."

He turned his face away from the window and obeyed her. She bent forward, that she might see him more clearly in the gathering gloom.

"I do not understand!" she said wearily. "You look almost as though some good thing had happened to you. She did not ——"

Bryan shook his head.

"No. It is just a little hope. That is all! Perhaps I have no right to it. But she talked to me for the first time

as though I were of the same flesh and blood as herself. She knows that I am not giving her up. She faltered when she spoke to me. She forgot to be a statue; she looked and spoke like a woman. I had never seen her like it before!"

"She will never marry you!" Miss Bettesford said sadly. "You do not know these Wessemers, Bryan. I do. They are proud, and cold, and selfish. She would be the last woman in the world to marry a man who was not of her own rank, and you — my poor boy — you ——"

He held up his hand, looking at her in surprise. Her hands were trembling, and her voice was feverish with excitement.

"Ay, I know!" he said doggedly. "But I may not be always nameless! And if I am — so much the greater will be my triumph when I make her love me. But you are talking too much. I was forgetting."

Her thin, trembling hands were upon his shoulders, and she was leaning over towards him. A brilliant spot of scarlet was burning on her thin cheeks, and her eyes were strangely bright.

"Bryan," she cried, "give her up! Give her up! Bryan, you are only sowing for yourself the seeds of a greater sorrow! There are women in the world more worthy of you who will be kinder than she!"

He shook his head.

"There are no other women in the world for me," he muttered. "Besides, you do not know! The name I have taken was really my father's name. I am having a search made. Every day I am expecting news. It may be ——"

He stopped short. She had suddenly thrown aside the rugs, and had risen to her feet. She was standing a little way away from him on the hearthrug, with her hands pressed to her head, and a strange look in her face. When

she spoke her voice reached him in a forced, half-stifled whisper.

"Bryan — you are killing me!" she cried. "God help you! God help us both! You have no name! You never will have! And it is my fault!"

He rose slowly up and stood facing her. His eyes were distended and his lips were trembling. He did not recognize his own voice. It was like a far-off echo sounding dully in his ears. And through the twilight her eyes seemed to be burning in her gaunt, white face as she watched him.

"Your fault! Your — your fault!"

"Yes, Bryan. I — I am your mother!"

She made a sudden movement towards him, and held wide her arms. A wild imploring tenderness flashed into her face, showed itself even in the gestures of her mute dramatic appeal. After all, he was her son, her flesh and her blood. How could he curse her!

"Bryan! Bryan!"

Her voice touched an exquisite note of appeal, and faltered. He did not move. He was standing like a great statue of stone. She watched the lines of his face in agony. Was this to be her death, the crowning of her life of sorrow? For close on thirty years the shadow of her sin had stalked by her side, had dwelt with her through the long nights and the dreary days. Was this its incarnation come to torture her, to deal the final and the cruellest stripe of all? The very glow of life which warmed his veins was hers. He was her creature — her son, flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. Once more she found courage, and she called out to him:

"Bryan, forgive me! Speak to me, or I shall die!"

He opened his great arms, and with a little cry, she fell into them.

"Forgive! I have nothing to forgive you!" he said hoarsely. "You are my mother!"

Then the low ceiling seemed to her to vanish into air, and a light came down from heaven. For nine-and-twenty years she had been a lone and suffering woman, and now — she had found a son!

Yet when it was all over, when the passionate kisses with which she had covered his face were burning no longer, and many things had passed between them which have no place in this or any story, he felt a sudden chill at his heart. The joy of this thing had been instant and deep, but there was an after-taste of bitterness. They were still alone, and, holding her hands, and looking down upon the floor, he asked her that question.

"Mother — tell me! I want to know about him."

She tightened her clasp upon his hands.

"Have you not guessed?" she murmured.

Their eyes met. He knew! He opened his lips to speak, but the sound was drowned by the furious galloping of horses in the lane. They both turned towards the window. A brougham covered with mud, and with steaming horses, had drawn up at the gate, and a tall, slim figure was walking up the garden path. Mother and son looked at one another.

"There is no time for me to go away," he said hoarsely.

"You need not," she answered. "Stay!"

He held her hands, and thus they stood for a moment. Then the door was opened, and the little maidservant announced the Earl of Wessemer.

He came towards them out of the shadows, holding his hat in his hand; but in the centre of the room he paused. A leaping tongue of firelight had shown him her face and his. He realized at once that the secret of a lifetime had gone for ever.

He set his hat down, and came forward more slowly. That studiously-acquired philosophy by which he had aimed

at the extinction of all emotion stood him in good stead. He did not lose one iota of his self-control. Whilst they faced him, ill at ease and constrained, he was at once urbane and collected. The dramatic pathos of the situation was altogether lost upon him.

"So, Bryan, you have found your mother!" he said quietly. "Perhaps it is better!"

Bryan did not answer. He had no words at his command. He stood dumb.

"It is possible that you may feel very bitterly towards me," Lord Wessemer continued calmly, standing a little way from the two, with his hands behind his back. "If it be so, I do not blame you. I was the sinner, and you have to bear the burden of my fault. It must seem heinously unfair to you. It is heinously unfair. But the thing has happened before, and it will happen again. I am more sorry than I ever imagined I should be. I would give even the remaining years of my life to set you right with the world! But I cannot do it! Nobody can do it! If you reflect calmly upon the subject, you will remember that all feeling bestowed upon it is wasted. It cannot be altered. Say what you have to say to me, Bryan!"

He drew himself a little away from his mother, and stood apart. For several moments a deep silence reigned in the room. They both waited for his sentence. A log of wood fell from the fire, and a flame leaped up. In the red light they both caught a glimpse of his face. His brows were closely drawn, but its expression was quite inscrutable. She shivered as she looked at it, and nervously clasped her hands. There was something there akin to his father.

"Not here," he answered at last. "I will talk to you when we are alone."

"Come back with me now," Lord Wessemer said, taking up his hat. "It will be better to have it over."

Bryan turned, and, stooping down, kissed his mother tenderly. She drew his face down to hers.

"You will not be too harsh?" she pleaded.

"I will not."

"You will remember ——"

"I am not any one's judge," he answered quietly. "You need have no fear."

"And you will come back?"

"If not to-night, to-morrow," he promised.

So she was content, and she let him go.

CHAPTER XIV

BRYAN THE PHILOSOPHER

In less than half an hour the two men were sitting facing one another in the great library at Wessemer Court. Bryan was perfectly calm and composed. The dramatic strangeness of this new light thrown upon his life had passed away altogether, so far as his connection with Lord Wessemer was concerned. He found himself even looking around him, and wondering how he might have felt if this place had belonged to him, and he had been this man's lawful son. But when a servant brought in tea and liqueurs, and placed the tray between them, and Lord Wessemer pushed over a box of cigarettes towards him, the bathos of the whole situation dawned upon him with an irresistible grotesqueness. He leaned back in his chair and laughed long and silently. Lord Wessemer, who was lighting a cigarette, looked up at him curiously, forgetting to throw the match away until it almost burned his fingers. Then he sat down, and Bryan helped himself mechanically to a glass of curaçoa.

"There are one or two facts, Bryan, which it is your right to know, and my duty to tell you," Lord Wessemer began. "Shall I do so now?"

Bryan nodded.

"You have learned to-day who your parents are. You have learned also that they, or rather one of them—myself

— have done you an injury for which nothing can ever atone. Remember, Bryan, that I am the only one on whom a shadow of blame can fall — and I am very sorry."

It was the first note of real feeling which had found its way into Lord Wessemer's tone. Bryan detected it at once, but he took no notice.

"Twenty-eight years ago I was Guy Bryan Nugent, with three persons between myself and the Wessemer title, very poor and very discontented. At that time your mother was the daughter of the Vicar of Wessemer, old Mr. Charles Bettesford, and we fell in love. I had not a penny — neither had she. Marriage seemed utterly impossible, and even I, steeped to the lips in all the dissipations and wild notions of Paris and Vienna (I was in the Embassy there), dared not suggest any alternative to her who was one of the sweetest, and purest, and most beautiful of women. But in the end I did worse — much worse! I pressed her to consent to a secret marriage. By what arts I succeeded, it does not matter now. I did succeed; only what I styled a secret marriage was a sham. It is true that we were married in a church, down in a small Devonshire village, but the man who married us was a confidant of my own, a worthless fellow, and a thorough scamp. His father was the clergyman of the parish, but he was an invalid, and lived abroad, leaving a curate in charge to look after his work. There were two churches, eight miles apart, and one of them was almost always closed, being in a desolate, unpeopled region. The son of the clergyman was my confederate. Your mother knew that he had been my college friend, and readily believed that he was in orders. As a matter of fact, he was not. It was a carefully thought out plan, and it succeeded.

"A year after our pretended marriage I was obliged to report myself at Vienna, and I hurried off there, leaving your mother in the little Swiss village where we had been

living. The illness of a subordinate detained me for some time. One morning a telegram reached me. Your mother was dangerously ill. I left at once, and was with her in twenty-four hours. I found her in a delirium, and from her ravings I gathered that she had discovered, by some means or other, my treachery. At the height of her illness you were born. I had you removed, and when, after weeks of unconsciousness, she recovered her reason, she was told that you were dead."

"What a villain you were!" Bryan exclaimed involuntarily.

"I admit it," Lord Wessemer answered calmly. "I was a villain! As soon as your mother recovered I offered to make her the only reparation possible. I had come into some money, and I offered to marry her. She refused! Nothing that I could urge moved her! She went into a sisterhood and I returned to Vienna. We did not meet again for twenty years. I had given the living of Wessemer to her nephew, Raymond Bettesford, for her sake, as she must have known. Raymond was an orphan then, and they were living together. For his sake she made no demur, and she came back to Wessemer. On my return from abroad I went to see her. You were there. She was already suspicious. The next day she sent for me. The time was over for falsehoods between us. I told her everything! I told her where I had placed you when young — it was not far from here — and how you had disappeared suddenly. It was when you went to America."

Bryan was thinking.

"Then it was you that blackguard Hamilton or Huntly came to see! He reeled into my cottage one night, drunk! He had travelled thousands of miles, he said, to find some one — he meant you! You were away, and so he found me out, and in a maudlin way kept dropping hints that he knew

my parentage. I gave him a bed, and in the morning he had gone. I followed him — to California!"

"That was Maurice Huntly!" Lord Wessemer said. "The man who helped me deceive your mother. Did you find him?"

"Yes, I found him — dead!" Bryan answered. "But I got some papers he left behind. A copy of a marriage certificate between Bryan Nugent and Marion Dennison, and a birth certificate — my own!"

"That was my own name!" Lord Wessemer said.

"Hamilton, when he was dying, spoke of papers more valuable still than these! In San Francisco I procured them. They were letters, love-letters — yours and hers, I suppose!"

"Ay, he stole them. I am glad that the man is dead!" Lord Wessemer declared. "Bryan, many years ago I offered to marry your mother. She refused me! To her I can make no atonement, save that I have not married any one else. With you it may be different. I am well off! I can give you money, or ——"

Bryan stretched out his huge limbs and laughed.

"Money! I do not know, but I fancy that I am a richer man than you, Lord Wessemer! I have over a hundred thousand pounds in the Bank of England, and last week my partner told me to draw on him for anything under a million dollars. No, I do not want your money!"

"My friendship may be useful to you!"

Bryan looked at him steadfastly.

"In what way?"

"Well, I could get you into Parliament. I could help you into your right place in society."

"I can do all that for myself, quite easily, thanks," Bryan answered, "or rather, my wealth will do it for me!"

There was a moment's silence. Lord Wessemer spoke:

"Am I to understand, then, that — that you refuse my friendship — that you wish to have nothing to do with me?"

"No, I do not go so far as that!" Bryan said slowly. "I have no ill-feeling against you, Lord Wessemer. You have probably suffered enough. God knows you deserve it, not for my sake, but hers. You call yourself a philosopher, don't you? Well, I, too, am philosopher enough not to curse you because you have sent me into the world nameless. You say you want to help me. Well, you can!"

"I am glad to hear it," Lord Wessemer said. "I am very glad."

"Thank you! Well, I want to marry your niece, Lady Helen! I have wanted to all my life."

Lord Wessemer raised his eyebrows. He was almost surprised.

"How can I help you?" he asked. "Lady Helen is ambitious, and she is peculiar."

"Exactly. You can help me first negatively, by not refusing your consent. You are her guardian, I understand."

"I will give my hearty consent at any time," Lord Wessemer said. "But I suppose you know Lady Helen. What are you going to tell her about yourself, and your family?"

"I will see to that," Bryan answered, frowning. "All that I want from you is unlimited opportunity of seeing her, and your consent when I ask for it."

"You shall have both," Lord Wessemer declared. "But, Bryan, just a word. I think I ought to tell you that Lady Helen is not at all the sort of young woman to make a romantic marriage. She has no imagination, and very little heart; added to which, she is socially ambitious. Only last season she refused two or three men, solely because their position did not satisfy her. I think it right to tell you this."

"Exactly," Bryan remarked. "I know that I am attempting a difficult thing, but you will find that I shall succeed. I am going now. Can I come up again? You understand me!"

"We dine at eight," Lord Wessemer said, "and I believe we are alone. I shall say that I pressed you to come!"

Bryan rose. Lord Wessemer held out his hand across the table. There was a moment's dead silence.

"I do not think that I want to shake hands with you — just yet," Bryan said slowly. "It doesn't matter, does it? It is purely a sentimental feeling, and I know that you are above such trifles. I shall be here at eight."

Lord Wessemer watched him go, without moving; watched him through the tall French windows cross the park on his way homewards. Then his hand fell heavily to his side. There was a curious gray shade in his pale face, and his eyes were dim. He sat down in his chair, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XV

A SILENT TOAST

At a few minutes to eight, Bryan handed his coat and hat to a footman in the great round hall of Wessemer Court, and was ushered into the drawing-room. The large apartment was empty, and only dimly lit, but from the smaller extension of it, the yellow drawing-room, as Lady Helen had made it, came the sound of soft music, and the glow of a deeper light through the gauze curtains. He walked across and raised them softly.

His approach had been quite noiseless, and Lady Helen, who was sitting with her profile towards him, did not at once look up. During the moment which elapsed before she was aware of his presence, he found time for a swift glance around the little chamber. It was really only a recess curtained off from the larger apartment, but its style of furniture and decoration had given it an identity of its own. The walls were hung with deep yellow satin, and the same colour was carried out in the upholstery, and the dainty little antique chairs and couches. A bright fire was burning in the grate, and the glow of the flames was mingled with the paler light of half-a-dozen wax candles in a great silver candelabrum. The odour of dead rose-leaves from a huge blue china bowl was floating upon the air, already perfumed with the faint aromatic scent of several vases of yellow and

white chrysanthemums. To Bryan it was like a little fairy chamber. It was the type of that new world of refined and elegant sensuousness which lay before him.

Some slight movement betrayed his presence, and Lady Helen's slim white fingers rested for a moment on the keys as she glanced up. Their eyes met — and more even than in those few minutes when they had last stood together on the moorside, she realized what a passion was smouldering in this lover of hers. She looked down, and a slight pink flush stole into her cheeks. It died away almost as swiftly as it had come, but its momentary presence annoyed her. Even in her schooldays she had not been used to blush.

" Lord Wessemer was a little late going up to dress," she said. " I think he must have fallen asleep in the library. He won't be long."

He bowed silently, and came a little further into the room, standing by the side of the piano, and watching her fingers glide over the keys. She was playing again, but very softly.

" I think," he remarked, " that to thoroughly appreciate the refinements and the beautiful side of life, one ought, some time or other, to have been a boor; at any rate to have lived amongst boorish people, and boorish surroundings."

" Very likely," she answered. " Only there would be the danger of always remaining a boor."

" I was thinking of myself," he went on a little absently. " To be with you here in this room and in this atmosphere, is like — heaven! "

She laughed softly.

" I should like to have seen the people with whom you dwelt in California," she said. " I suppose the men must have been dreadfully rough, and the women — were they as bad? "

A sudden icy chill stole through his veins, and into his heart. The joy of the present was suddenly forgotten. The air seemed full of Myra's voice; he saw her face, at one moment dark and glowing, brilliant with all the seductiveness of her wonderful beauty; the next, pale and worn, yet chastened with that wonderful effort of self-immolation. He felt the touch of her hands across his face, her kisses upon his lips, her caresses as she crept into his arms. Oh, the horror of it! His eyes, half-frightened, half-fascinated, stole to where Lady Helen sat, half-carelessly waiting for his answer. To him, that pale, proud face of hers, a little softened this evening by an unusual tinge of colour in her cheeks, was the exquisite type of all that was sweetest and purest in womankind. His eyes wandered over her white lace gown, fashioned in somewhat severer style than is customary for an ordinary evening dress, and which seemed to him in its spotless daintiness emblematic of her soul, so white, and so far removed from even a thought of evil. Supposing she were to know! He looked into her face once more, and his heart grew faint at the very thought. If there was any quality lacking there at all, it was surely pity — the softer side of womanliness. The forehead was high and frank, and the hair which would have waved over it was drawn back in severe but becoming simplicity. Her features were clearly and delicately chiselled, the lines of the small mouth were distinct and firm. Her head was thrown back as she usually carried it, and just a suggestion of white arms and shoulders was glimmering through the gauze of her bodice. He looked away, and set his teeth together. It seemed like profanation to think of that other, and of those days, in her presence.

Fortunately perhaps for him, the need of answering that question of hers passed. Lord Wessemer came in, and immediately afterwards the butler parted the fluttering cur-

tains and announced dinner. Obeying a glance from Lord Wessemer, Bryan offered his arm to Lady Helen. Lord Wessemer came behind alone.

Dinner was served, not in the great, sombre banqueting hall, but in a smaller room, opposite to the library, and on a round table. The whole of the meal was like a further revelation to Bryan, one step beyond into the world of elegance and refinement. He was by no means unusually silent, yet he found time to appreciate, even to revel in, the unwonted luxury. He drank sparingly, but the first glass of champagne seemed to have a curiously exhilarating effect upon him. All his senses awoke to the delicate charm of his surroundings. The little table at which they sat was all ablaze with heavy sparkling silver, and dazzling glass, with fair linen and dainty fruits, themselves a very feast in colouring, and great masses of sweet-scented flowers filling the air with their faint delicious perfume. The table itself, and the faces of the two people who sat with him, were bathed in a soft glow from the pink-shaded lamps, whilst the room seemed dark and gloomy. It was like a little fairy oasis amongst the shadows; like his life, he thought, frowning heavily for a moment as he thought of those days which had been all shadows. He raised his glass, and he drank a silent toast, "Perish the memory of them for ever!" Perish all memories of those long days and gloomy nights on the banks of the Blue River; of that night of horror in the desert; of the tortures of San Francisco! And perish, too, all memories of that brilliant dark face, with its wild beauty, and its passionate love for him flashing out of the eyes, betraying itself in every word she uttered. Away with them! Let every thought of her fade out of his heart and brain, and remain buried for ever and for ever.

And as if in some measure purged by that silent outcry of his heart, he suffered his eyes to dwell more freely upon

that fair, proud face so close to his, so clearly visible over the waving maidenhair ferns, and the blossoming scarlet geraniums. He joined more in the conversation, and it was odd how well he talked, and how musical his deep bass sounded in contrast to the other lighter voices. Once or twice their eyes met. She did not avert hers, nor did she give him any token such as he craved, of some intelligence between them. He fancied that she had grown a little colder to him. She addressed him directly but seldom, and long before dinner was over, she leaned back in her chair, graceful but bored. He was wise enough to take no notice of it, but continued his conversation with Lord Wessemer anent the shooting of running animals. As soon as she could, she rose, and Bryan, who was nearest to the door, opened it for her. Again he was disappointed. She swept through with a faint inclination of the head, but she did not look at him.

Bryan resumed his seat, and lit a cigarette from the silver box which Lord Wessemer had pushed towards him. A little cloud of blue smoke curled upwards over the banks of flowers and the dainty dishes of hothouse fruits. Through it Bryan could see that Lord Wessemer's gray eyes were coolly studying his face.

"Has Lady Helen told you that we are going up to town early next month?" Lord Wessemer asked.

Going away! Bryan bit his lip, and ground his heel into the carpet, but he answered calmly enough:

"No! I am sorry to hear it!"

Lord Wessemer smoked on deliberately for a minute of two. Then he leaned forward to Bryan.

"I don't see why you need be sorry," he said. "You must go yourself; set up some chambers in Piccadilly, buy some horses, and see something of London life. There are a couple of very decent London clubs into which I have

influence enough to get you, and I will see that you meet the right sort of people!"

Bryan's first instinct was one of pleasure. Anything to avoid separation! Then he thought of that worn, sweet face, with its gray hair and fond eyes; how would she bear his absence? His face clouded.

"I do not think that I shall be able to leave the Hall just yet," he said slowly.

"You are thinking of — of her!" Lord Wessemer said. "She is wanting to go to London, to be near Dr. Hacker. If you go, she will go!"

"Then I will go!" Bryan answered.

"Good!" declared Lord Wessemer. "Come! If you are sure you won't have a liqueur, let us go and find Lady Helen. One moment; you haven't finished your claret, I see. Let me give you a toast. London! Success!"

Bryan lifted his glass to his lips, and drained it. When he set it down, he repeated Lord Wessemer's words:

"London! Success!"

CHAPTER XVI

A SOUL FLITTING INTO THE SUNLIGHT

In the hall the two men parted. Lord Wessemer went into the library, and Bryan turned aside to the drawing-room. He was going to find Lady Helen. The fascination of knowing that she was in the same house, that in all probability they would spend the next hour together, was irresistible. He entered the drawing-room, and in the little yellow chamber he found her writing.

She laid down her pen as he entered, with the calm air of a hostess whose duty it is to entertain, raising her eyebrows a little as though surprised at his coming.

"I thought that you and Lord Wessemer would play billiards!" she remarked. "Won't you sit down?"

Bryan took a chair, and brought it a little nearer to hers.

"Lord Wessemer was tired, I fancy, and he had some letters to write. He has gone into the library. Am I interrupting you?"

She took up her pen again.

"If you will excuse me, I will finish this note," she said. "It is an invitation I ought to have answered a week ago!"

He bowed, and took up a magazine which lay on the table by his side. But he did not read. Over its pages he looked steadily at the bent head of the woman opposite him. How smooth was her forehead, and how cold and clearly

cut her features! Everything about her savoured of an exclusiveness, personal as well as aristocratic. Would he ever be able to break down the barrier, he wondered; to see the light break across her face, and see the depths of her calm blue eyes stirred with passion? A sudden chill went to his heart. Was it possible for him, or any other man, to do it? Was she really as cold and passionless as she seemed; as pure and, alas! as unattainable as that glorious white snow on the Sierra tops when smitten by the morning sunlight? He sighed, and just at that moment she laid down her pen.

"May I trouble you to ring the bell?" she asked.

He sprang up, and she collected her letters into a little heap. The servant who came brought them coffee in tiny, slender cups. Bryan took some, and sipped it thoughtfully.

"You did not tell me that you were going to London soon!" he said, after a brief pause.

She looked at him with a faint smile — a smile which irritated him vaguely.

"Why should I? Every one goes to London for the season. I thought you knew that!"

"I am glad that every one goes," he remarked, "because I am going."

"Indeed! When did you decide that?"

"This evening. It was Lord Wessemer's suggestion. I have spoken to him about you."

"What?"

Her high, delicate eyebrows were contracted into a distinct frown. She was looking as nearly angry as she permitted herself to be.

"I have spoken to Lord Wessemer! I told him that I wanted you to marry me! How could I come here, and eat his dinner, and not tell him?"

"I hope you added that I refused you!"

"I did. I also told him that one of your reasons for refusing me was the improbability of gaining his consent."

"What did he say to that?"

"He gave it to me!"

She looked at him, literally dumbfounded. Once again she felt a thrill almost of fear at the dogged persistence of this man, and his silent contempt of all difficulties. There was something mysterious about his success, in his rapid transition from vagabondage to the gentleman he undoubtedly was, in his vast wealth, and in this last crowning piece of successful audacity, the cool demanding of her hand from that most aristocratic and unsympathetic of men, the Earl Wessemer!

"He gave you his consent!" she repeated slowly.

"Yes! He gave it to me! He did not make any objection at all."

"But did he ask you nothing — forgive me! — as to your family?"

Bryan shook his head.

"He knows that I have no family," he answered. "He knows that so far as the world is concerned, I have to make my own name. But in these days there is much that can be done by a man who has ambition and money. I am very rich indeed, and I am very ambitious. As for the rest, Lord Wessemer has offered me his friendship and his influence."

"You have surprised me very much indeed!" Lady Helen said, looking into the fire. "I had imagined that Lord Wessemer's prejudices would have prevented his even listening to you!"

"If only I could hope that yours would vanish as speedily," Bryan said, his deep bass voice a little tremulous, and his eyes very soft and bright, "I should feel myself very happy. Lady Helen, tell me what you would have me do to win you, and I will do it. Would you like me to go into

Parliament? I could find a seat in the autumn, and with you to work for, I promise that I would make a name that you would not be ashamed of. Lord Wessemer tells me that the doors of society will not be closed upon me; that his influence is quite enough to enable me to mix with the people whom you would wish to live amongst. My whole life should be an offering to you; and I would make you happy, Lady Helen. I would indeed!"

She looked at him, not unkindly, but gravely. She was indeed a little moved, more moved than she had ever been before by a man's pleading. But even then she felt that this new feeling, sweet in a sense though it was, was scarcely a thing to trust to. It might die away as swiftly as it had come; as yet she had no confidence in it. In any case, it had no strength to undermine all the preconceived ideas of her life. She wanted to be fair — to be fair to herself as well as to him; and she thought for some time before she answered.

"I am afraid that you are going to be disappointed in me, Mr. Bryan," she said slowly. "I do really admire the wonderful way in which you have stepped out of your old self, and if, as you say, my influence has had anything to do with it, I am very glad. But you ask from me what I am not able to give. You want me to care for you in a certain way, and I do not! It is best to be candid, is it not?"

"It is best," Bryan answered. "But, Lady Helen, I do not expect too much. As yet I am almost a stranger to you. I am content to wait. I have never dared to hope to win you easily. All I ask is, that you will take some time to consider."

"That I will grant," she answered. "It is only fair. I warn you that I am naturally not at all of a sympathetic or affectionate disposition. I have never expected to care for any one in the way you desire. I still feel that it is not

likely. But if you wish it, I will give you my answer, say in six months' time."

She had risen, and was standing by his side, a fair, stately figure in her creamy-white gown, with its soft folds of lace rising one above the other like the waves of the sea, and emitting at every rustle a faint sweet perfume of dried lavender, which became mingled with the odour of the roses at her bosom. One small slipper was stealing out from beneath a cloud of white lace draperies, and resting upon the fender; her elbow was upon the broad mantelpiece, and her head was reclining slightly upon her hand. They stood together for several moments without any further speech. Then suddenly he took a quick step towards her, and held out his arms. A swift uncontrollable desire had come to him. He must take her into his arms, and clasp her there. One kiss on those firm, proud lips, and she would be his — his for ever! A passion leaped into his face; his hot breath fell even upon her cheek. She, too, was agitated. The rich colour had flooded her cheeks. She was, in a sense, fascinated by the strength of his passion, and the desire in his glowing eyes. If he had carried out his purpose at that moment; if he had risked everything and taken her boldly into his arms, he might have broken down for ever that barrier of icy exclusiveness which custom and disposition had built up around her. If he had dared, she would have been very near yielding. It was the golden opportunity of his life, and while he hesitated it passed away.

In that intense silence they both distinctly heard the sound of quick footsteps crossing the outer room. The tension between them passed away in a moment. Bryan turned his head, and gave a great start. Raymond Bettesford, pale and splashed with mud, was standing in the aperture.

"Bryan, she is ill — dying!" he faltered. "There is a horse ——"

With a low, deep cry Bryan sprang past him. He stopped for neither hat nor coat, but in his thin evening clothes he sprang on to the horse which Raymond had ridden up. There were a few moments of wild riding through the darkness, with the bleak wind rushing past him, a leap from the park into the lane, and he was there, through the lit hall and up the narrow staircase to where a door stood open, and a woman lay upon a bed, with a smile upon her lips which was the smile of death. He knew it in a moment; he knew that there was no hope. The doctor and the little servant-maid stood away from the bedside as he entered, a strange, wild figure, with his wind-tossed hair and mud-bespattered clothes. He fell on his knees before her, and his arms drew her into his embrace. But he could not speak.

"My boy!" she murmured. "My poor, dear boy!"

She closed her eyes again. He whispered to her, but she did not hear. White and still she lay in his arms through the long, weary hours of the night. And Bryan never moved.

She opened her eyes at last. The night was gone. Through a chink in the blind an odd little ray of white sunlight had found its way on to the bed. She lay looking at it for a moment, as though bewildered. Then her arms suddenly tightened around Bryan. There was a bright light in her face. She understood.

"My boy!" she cried faintly. "Thank God! Thank God! The morning has come!"

An hour later he wandered out into the sunlit garden, and came back with a handful of fresh, wet violets. As he passed up to her room with them, he heard the sound of a

man's deep, subdued sobbing. The library door was open, and he glanced mechanically in. It was Lord Wessemer!

He called out to him softly, and beckoned. Together the two men stole upstairs, and into the chamber of death.

They stood over her, and Bryan, pointing to the pillow, gave the wet, fragrant violets into Lord Wessemer's hands. He laid them down softly. The two men stood side by side.

"Bryan — do you think — that she forgave me?" he asked.

"Ay! I know she did!" Bryan answered.

Lord Wessemer held out his hand hesitatingly.

"Will you?" he asked.

Bryan ground his teeth.

"She was an angel!" he said simply. "I am not!"

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

THE "HILARITY" STAR

A TALL, broad-shouldered man, with a loose overcoat barely concealing his evening clothes, stood on the pavement opposite the "Hilarity" Theatre, reading the play-bill. It was eight o'clock, and the exterior of the place was a perfect blaze of light. A long stream of carriages and hansoms were setting down people, and there being some rumour of a visit from Royalty, a strip of red drugget had been laid across the pavement from the stalls entrance. Several policemen and commissionaires were very busy opening and banging doors, and shouting at the cabmen, who would drive off with their horses' heads in the wrong direction. Altogether there was a good deal of bustle.

Bryan, who was standing with his hands thrust deep down in his coat-pockets, and smoking a cigar, glanced irresolutely into the crowded vestibule, and hesitated.

"Don't see why I shouldn't have an evening off," he said to himself. "I can get to the Forresters' after this thing's over."

He glanced down again at the bill. There it was in great, staring letters:

To-night

NEW COMIC OPERA

"MADAME LA PRINCESSE"

MISS MERCIER

AS

La Princesse

"Everybody's talking about the thing," he muttered. "I'll see if I can get a seat, anyway."

He threw away his cigar, which was scrambled for by half-a-dozen urchins, and passing through the open doors, entered the luxurious reception room, with its velvet fauteuils and graceful palms, and little groups of women in soft opera cloaks talking to their cavaliers. He made his way to the ticket office and asked for a seat.

The man looked at him in surprise.

"Haven't you booked, sir?" he asked.

"No. Have you a seat anywhere I can have?"

The man looked away and whispered to his assistant. Then he turned to Bryan.

"We have just had a single stall returned," he said. "You can have that, if you like. It is the only vacant seat in the house."

Bryan put down his half-guinea and took the ticket. Then he made his way down the corridor, bought a programme and book of the words, and settled down in the comfortable easy-chair with a sense of anticipation which made him laugh softly to himself as he realized it. He had been in London for nearly four months, and he had found society a little harder work than gold-digging, without half the satisfaction. This was his first evening to himself, and was the result of a moment's impulse. He had no binding engagement for an hour or so, and the sight of the

name on the bills, which was in every one's mouth, had presented a sudden temptation. He felt something like a schoolboy who has stolen into a circus.

The orchestra played the overture, which was long, but tuneful, and the curtain went up. Sometimes, afterwards, he tried to remember what it was all about, but he never could. He carried away only a hazy recollection of groups of chorus girls in the short hooped skirts and sabots of French peasants, the swinging sign of an old inn, and a lover in open-worked shirt and velvet knickerbockers, who sang the opening song magnificently, and whom Bryan himself loudly encored. He enjoyed it all hugely at the time, but the whole web of memory was swept away by the crisis which was so close at hand. At one moment he was applauding with a boyish enthusiasm, some sparks of which had survived his latter-day schooling, and the next, his hands had dropped nervously on to his knees, and he was sitting there with eyes still fastened upon the stage, and a curious dazed wonder numbing all his senses. The smile had vanished from his lips, and the colour from his cheeks. There was a singing in his ears, and a wild tumult in his heart. The ghost of his past was there on the gaily-lit stage, the central figure in that dainty scene of Arcadian voluptuousness. She was gliding to the front; there was a roar of applause, and then a deep hush. It was Myra! Myra in powdered hair, under which her dark eyes were flashing as brightly as ever, and silken gown with long train looped up over her arm! There was no possibility of any mistake. It was Myra, whose last note had just died away, and for whom had arisen that storm of applause which was thundering all around him.

He followed her through the act, watching her graceful movements and coquettish little gestures, without the shadow of a smile. He listened to her voice, which was

bringing all London to the theatre, without a single thrill of rapture. The fact that she was more beautiful than ever scarcely occurred to him. He was paralyzed by her mere presence there, within a few feet of him. Once, at a little trill in a song, he set his teeth and drew a sharp breath. She had sung like that one night, on the banks of the Blue River. They had been sitting outside the shanty, watching the fireflies in the valley. He had thrown his arm carelessly around her, and she had sung to him in the soft velvety darkness, with her face turned wistfully to the shadows of the Sierras, and the moonlight gleaming in her dark, passionate eyes. As the echoes of her voice died away, he ground his elbows into the cushioned arms of his stall, and swore.

At the end of the first act, he rose and quitted his seat, walking with the air of a man in a dream, and all the boyish light-heartedness of a few hours ago completely gone. He found his way with some difficulty to the back of the theatre, and, standing underneath a gas lamp, scribbled a single line on the back of a card.

He knocked at the stage-door, and stood for a moment in a bare passage until he was sharply confronted by the doorkeeper. He held out his card to him.

"I want you to take this to Miss Mercier," he said. "I'll wait for an answer!"

The man shook his head, and declined the card.

"Not a bit of use, sir," he said sharply. "There's been scores of them try it. Miss Mercier has given me strict orders to refuse all letters, or cards, or parcels — even flowers! If I were to disobey her, she'd very likely report me!"

"That's all right," Bryan answered quietly. "I am a old friend of Miss Mercier's. I knew her in America. Here!"

He slipped a sovereign into the man's unwilling palm. Bryan was standing underneath the gas lamp, and the man looked into his features doubtfully.

"There's been several tried to gammon me that they were friends of Miss Mercier's," he said slowly. "I don't mean no offence, sir, but you remember that if what you say is not true, I shall lose my place."

"You'll find that it is all right," Bryan answered. "Miss Mercier will remember me."

The man nodded, and went off. It was fully five minutes before he reappeared. On his return he addressed Bryan with more consideration.

"Miss Mercier was just going on, sir," he announced. "She had no time to write a line. She wished me to say that she would be leaving by this door at a quarter past eleven."

"Thank you!" Bryan said simply. "I will be here!"

He walked away and wandered aimlessly about the streets. He had no desire to see any more of the performance; another time would do for that. To-night he wanted to think. And so he walked away, unwittingly turning his steps towards the very heart of pleasure-seeking London, elbowing his way amongst the crowds of men and women whose faces he did not see, and all the time trying to fix this thing in his mind, to realize what it was that had happened, and to plan for himself some definite course of action. It was a fine May evening, and, even around Leicester Square, the wind was soft, and an odour of spring was in the air. Women laughed in his face, and men turned round and grumbled at his calm monopoly of the pavement. He did not hear either of them. The laughter and soft whisperings of the one, and the angry asides of the other, were jumbled together in his ears. He could only think of this

strange resurrection of his past, and of that dark bewitching face which had followed him from across the seas to the world's capital.

He walked restlessly about, a tall, striking figure amongst the motley throng, until close upon eleven o'clock. He had looked at his watch beneath a gas lamp, and the simple mechanical action seemed to restore him to every-day life. He drew a quick breath, swung round, and walked back to the theatre.

There were several men standing about in the narrow lane, a little apart, like sentinels, with their eyes fixed upon the closed door. Bryan remembered, with an odd little feeling of annoyance, that only a few nights ago he had spoken with contempt of the boys who hung around the stage-door of a theatre. He, too, was one of them now in the eyes of any who should see him there.

One or two stylishly-dressed young women came out and strolled away. Then the door opened, and his heart gave a little jump. Myra was there, looking eagerly around her. Their eyes met, and she gave a little start forward. She held out both her hands to him, with the old impulsive delight, and forgetting that such a thing as onlookers existed, he found himself grasping them warmly.

"At last! At last!" she murmured, with a little familiar croon of delight. "I began to despair of you."

He held her hands still, and looked down into her face.

"I only knew that you were in England to-night!" he said. "I was one of the audience. I found you out quite by accident."

She moved across the pavement, and at her motion he opened the door of a cab waiting there."

"You will come home with me, of course!" she said. "We can talk there."

He handed her in and followed himself. As he put up the window, one of the men who had been waiting about, walked away frowning. Bryan leaned back, and bit his lip. It was Sir George Conyers, Lady Helen's cousin.

CHAPTER II

A SORROW'S CROWN OF SORROW

THE drive was only a short one, and while it lasted, they scarcely spoke a word. Once, soon after they started, her hand, as though by accident, fell upon his arm. He made no effort to move it, but he did not take it into his. He sat there dallying with a strange sense of unreality, as the cab rolled along Regent Street. Every now and then the interior of the shabby little vehicle was momentarily illuminated with a flash of light from a passing carriage or a street lamp, and at such times he stole several glances at her. It was scarcely possible for him to believe that this was Myra; that this closely-veiled woman, in her dark, well-fitting clothes, from which came the faint odour of some delicate perfume, was really the wild, uncultivated girl who had sat with him in the doorway of his shanty far away in that wild Western world, and watched the glimmering shadows on the mountain's side, and sang to him, and tried to count the fireflies around the perfumed shrubs. Most wonderful of all metamorphoses!

The cab set them down at the door of a quiet, dull-looking house, in a street leading off Portland Place. Myra took out a latch-key, and opened the door.

"My sitting-room is upstairs!" she said.

He followed her, with sudden grim recollection of that

other time when she had brought him home to her rooms, high up in one of the tallest and craziest lodging-houses in San Francisco. After the gesture with which she had motioned him to follow her, she did not look round again. They went up two flights of stairs, and then Myra opened the door of a good-sized, comfortably-furnished sitting-room, and ushered him in. There were flowers upon the table, and a little fire burning on the hearth. A shaded lamp, turned very low, stood upon the sideboard. She closed the door, and turned the lamp up, standing for a few seconds within the little halo of rosy glow. Then she turned towards him, with arms timidly held out, and a wonderful softness in her deep, bright eyes.

"Kiss me, Bryan!" she murmured.

He moved nearer towards her, and she drew him into her arms, clasping them around his neck with gentle force. Her head fell back a little, and notwithstanding the fashionable little hat and raised veil, there was something curiously familiar in the slight disorder of her hair, and the seductive curve of her lips. He stooped and kissed her, loathing himself that he did so, but powerless against the witchery of her soft caress, and the expectation of her glowing eyes. Then she drew him to a couch by the fire, and sat down beside him, holding one of his hands.

"You have changed!" she said. "You have become a gentleman! I always said that you were one, and I was right, wasn't I?"

"And you," he said, ignoring her speech; "the change in you is more wonderful still! Tell me about it! Go back — to the very beginning!"

"To the very beginning!" she repeated. "That means to when we parted in San Francisco — you went out to buy your ticket — one of those stifling nights, nearly two years ago. Yes, I remember it! It was an awful night!"

The colour burned his cheeks. He was hot with shame. The brutality of his conduct stood out before him, written plain and large. On that night he had fled home with the money which was the price of her soul; had fled home, and had left her to be the mistress of the man whom he knew she loathed. What a coward! And yet she had forgiven him!

"Bryan!" she said. "Do you know I have never really blamed you, and yet — yet when you heard what happened that night, I sorter wondered — I mean it seemed strange that you never tried to find out what became of me. It was not quite — kind, was it?"

"I do not understand," he said. "I know that I was a blackguard to go, and I have despised myself for it every day since. But what do you mean happened? You went — to him?"

Her expression suddenly changed. She sat and looked at him breathlessly.

"You did not know that Amies Rutten was shot dead that night in his library?"

"Good God! No!" he cried. "I heard nothing of it! I left San Francisco at seven that night, and travelled straight to New York. I heard nothing!"

"You did not know that Amies Rutten was shot that night!" she said. "Say it again!"

"I did not know it!" he repeated firmly. "How should I? I never bought American newspapers. If I had known it, I should have come back!"

She got up and walked away for a moment. When she came back, her eyes were very bright, and her lips were quivering.

"It seems odd to have to change all one's ideas about a thing," she said, sitting down again beside him. "Bryan, I never loved you less — I could not — but it seemed to

me that you were very cruel to leave me all alone to face the horror of that thing! And I have been blaming you all the time, and you did not deserve it. I am real sorry, Bryan!"

She flashed a brilliant smile upon him through a mist of tears, and swayed slightly towards him, so that he could have kissed her if he would. But he did not!

"I must tell you all about it, then!" she said nestling close up to him. "There isn't so very much to tell. That night I went to his house. I walked all the way, I remember, and I felt as though I were looking in the faces of the men and women who passed me, and upon the stars, for the last time. I was going to commit what I heard some one call the other day, moral suicide. Bryan," she went on softly, "you know that I was not what people call a good woman, but there are times when a woman almost glories in the sin she does, and there are times when she loathes it, and when every step further is a step deeper and deeper down into hell! When I took Amies Rutten's money, I took that first step; and as I walked towards his house that night, I felt as though I were giving myself up for ever — body and soul! It was something very much worse than death which I seemed to feel closing in upon me. There was a breeze blowing in from the sea when I crossed the Park, and I climbed on to one of those brown knolls to feel it on my face. I remember lingering there, and feeling that the winds would never blow upon me again, that I was going to my death! I could only think of it like that. I went on after a while, loitering very slowly, sitting every now and then on seats in the broad walk, watching the electric light from the cars flash against the deep green trees, and listening to the people's voices as they passed backwards and forwards. It was late when I got to his house, and as I drew near, I saw that there were a crowd of people outside it. My heart

gave a great leap. Something might have happened. I hurried on, and stood amongst the crowd. There were policemen guarding the house, and in all the lower rooms there were lights flashing and moving about. There was a man there whose face I knew, and I touched him on the arm.

"'What is it?' I asked.

"'Amies Rutten has been shot!' he answered.

"'Dead?' I demanded.

"'Stone dead!'

"I think I burst out laughing; I could not help it! I know that he looked at me as though I were mad, and I walked away along the streets and into the Park, laughing all the way softly to myself. Oh, it was horrible, Bryan! I was hysterical! I scarcely knew what I was doing! I didn't seem to realize the horror of it at all! I simply felt that the cords which had been dragging me down into hell had been cut, and that I was free."

"Who shot him?" Bryan asked.

She turned a little pale.

"You remember — the man I went to, when he refused to give me the papers, the man Jim told me to go to."

"Yes."

"It was through that. It was some secret society!"

"My God! Are you sure?"

"Yes," she answered. "Here is the proof!"

She crossed the room, and took an envelope out of her desk. She put it into Bryan's hand.

"That night, this was left in my rooms, sealed as you see it! It is yours! Take it! After all, you see, Amies Rutten was false. He did not give me all the papers!"

He put it into his pocket mechanically.

"And Skein?" he asked. "Did you ever see or hear of him again?"

She shuddered. "I heard of him! He was an Englishman who had become the tool of Amies Rutten. He sent him out to get those papers from Jim. All that tale of his was false. I read of his end the day I left America. He was picked up by a caravan in the desert, raving mad, and he died in a hospital in San Francisco."

"Tell me how you got here," he asked. "What happened after that night?"

"Why, the next day I had a letter, and a lawyer came to see me. Amies Rutten had left me fifty thousand dollars. I felt afraid to take it, but I did. And I dressed in black, and went to his funeral. I — I tried to pray for him. Afterwards I went to New York, and took the steamer for England. I wanted to get right away from America. On the boat there was a concert one night, and I sang. Mr. Doyle, the manager of this theatre, was on board, and he asked me if I would have some lessons in London, and go on the stage. I was quite willing — and that is all! Now, about yourself, please?" she wound up, with a little sigh of relief.

"My story is very uneventful compared with yours," he said. "You remember the gold find at the Blue River?"

She nodded. "Why, yes."

"Well, it has made me a very rich man; and Pete Morrison — you remember Pete — he sends me my share down to the last penny. I have a home down in the country, and I have made some friends. I have come up to town — to be fashionable!" He wound up with a laugh which savoured a little of bitterness.

"To be fashionable!" she repeated, looking at him as though for the first time she noticed the correctness, even fastidiousness, of his evening attire. "You are changed, Bryan. I wonder ——"

She rose suddenly from her seat, and commenced walking

up and down the room, with her hands clasped behind her back, walking with that wonderful sinuous grace of carriage about which the youth of London were raving.

She stopped in front of him. The colour came and went in her cheeks, her bosom was heaving. Before he could stop her, she had thrown herself upon her knees before him, and her hands were twined around his neck.

"Bryan, my love!" she murmured passionately, "I have been so lonely, so very lonely. Tell me that the old days are come again now. I am weary of living alone. You care for me still — just a little? I don't ask for too much, Bryan," she pleaded, tightening her clasp around his neck, and trying to bring his lips to hers. "I don't want to interfere with any other part of your life, I don't want to know your friends — only let me belong to you! Come to me sometimes, as often as you can. London is so sad and lonely, I cannot be without you, Bryan, my love!"

He kissed her; he could not help it. Then he drew a little away, and kept her hands clasped in his. Her passionate pleading and her beauty had stirred him in a vague, strange way. He felt that his own heart was beating wildly. It was only with an effort that he could speak calmly to her.

"Myra," he said, "you must not talk like this! You and I have passed into another stage of existence. What we did in that great New World, where all life seemed freer and simpler, would not — be right here. You were very good to me in those days, and they were very pleasant; but here, in London, it is different. You have a name and a future before you! People judge things differently here. They would — oh, don't you understand?"

"Bryan!"

He stopped at once. Something in her voice warned him.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Are you engaged?"

"No — not yet."

"Are you going to be?"

"I — hope so."

"Ah!"

She drew a deep breath. The colour suddenly left her cheeks. Even her lips seemed white. Her eyes were dry and tearless.

"You might just as well have told me so, as have tried to be — what is the word? — moral," she said quietly. "Men do not think of those things when they love. You do not love me — a little bit! That is all."

There was a dead silence. Bryan glanced at the clock on the chimneypiece, and wondered, in a dull sort of way, whether Lady Helen had left the Forresters', and what she thought of his absence. He knew exactly the amount of regret she would feel at his non-appearance, and he could even hear her half-careless question as to its cause. A coal fell on the hearth, and he glanced up. Myra was leaning back on the couch, with her face buried in its cushions.

He hesitated for a moment, and then bent over her.

"Myra!"

No answer.

He took her hand. It was yielded lifelessly, and without resistance.

"Myra, I knew her years before I ever knew you — before I came to California at all. Only, in those days, she was so far above me that I scarcely dared to think of her. It was partly because of her that I left England. Now, I am rich, and her friends are becoming my friends."

She did not look up at him, but her sobs ceased.

"Have you asked her to marry you? Has she promised?"

"Not yet! She is very proud, and her family are what

we call in England, noble. I am only rich. I have not even a name. Yet I think she will say 'yes,' soon."

"What is she like? Is she anything like me — in looks, I mean," she added hastily.

"Not in the least!" he answered. "She is fair, and she has blue-gray eyes, and her face is much colder than yours. Then, her manner is very different. She is very reserved, and I am afraid, a little too proud."

She nodded slowly.

"She is just like these icy aristocratic English girls I have read about. And you love her?"

He did not make any direct answer. He could not have told why he avoided doing so. To him these moments were almost as bitter as to her. The tragedy of this girl's life was summed up in him. However little he had been to blame in the first case, he could never hereafter deny that he had been the arbiter of her fate. She had been his, had belonged to him absolutely, body and soul. She had given herself to him because she loved him, and, man-like, he had accepted the sacrifice as a perfectly natural thing. The memory of those days burned within him as he sat there. He fancied them known to the world. He fancied Lady Helen, to him the prototype of all purity, looking with a scorn too deep for words upon this chapter of his life.

She sat up at last, and turned towards him. He was startled to see the deep lines under her eyes, and the intense pallor of her cheeks.

"Shall we be — quite strangers, then?" she asked. "Shall you never come to see me?"

In his heart he knew that it were far better not, but he lacked the brutal courage to say so.

"Of course I shall come, and often," he declared. "And some day Lady Helen — I must tell her about you — some day she will come too. Her ideas — are a little different

from ours; but when she knows that you saved my life she will want to see you."

Myra's great eyes were dim once more.

"I have been so lonely," she said. "To-night I thought that it was all over, I could scarcely sing for joy; and now I know that it must go on for ever — for ever! You cannot even spare me a little of your love!"

"I cannot," he answered sadly. "I will come and see you, if I may, and I will find you friends ——"

"I do not want any one but you," she interrupted. "I will not have any one else."

He stood up and took his hat from the table.

"Must you go?" she asked softly.

He looked away down on the floor, at the clock, anywhere but into that dark, passionate face, with its mute pleadings. He was ashamed to find that his heart was beating, that he was battling with a great desire to take her into his arms, to kiss the colour once more into her lips and cheeks, and to feel her heart beat against his. The clock on the mantelpiece struck one. He held out both his hands.

"Good-bye, Myra," he said. "I — I will come and see you again very soon."

She walked downstairs with him. At the door she held up her white, tear-stained face. He had no choice but to stoop and kiss her.

Then he walked away across the broad square, and into the silent streets, with the fire of her kiss still upon his lips. He walked with bent head and knitted brows. What would Lady Helen say to this?

CHAPTER III

THE EAST AND THE WEST

Society had upon the whole been very kind indeed to Bryan. Not content with accepting him at Lord Wessemer's instigation, it had chosen to make something of a celebrity of him. Here was a man, reported to be rich as Midas, who had actually toiled for his own wealth, with his own hands, and yet presented the *tout ensemble* of a gentleman of polish and culture, subtly mixed with a dash of pleasing originality. In a week or two after his arrival in London, Bryan found himself a member of several fairly exclusive clubs, and the recipient of more invitations than he could possibly accept. Without the least desire on his part, society chose to make of him something of a lion. The papers chronicled his comings and his goings. He received a good many delightful little invitations which were neither written in the third person nor printed upon cards; and finally when, at Lord Wessemer's suggestion, he bought some horses and commenced to drive in the Park, a crack sporting journal spoke of him as one of the best amateur whips of his day.

To Lord Wessemer, Bryan's success was the source of a good deal of cynical amusement, mingled with a strong undercurrent of deep satisfaction. Lady Helen was at first surprised, and then to her own amazement, gratified by it.

Unconsciously her manner towards Bryan altered. She was, so far as she was capable of such sentiment, touched by the stubborn devotion with which he had moulded all things towards the accomplishment of what she knew to be his great desire. She became less reserved, and occasionally almost confidential. She treated him with perhaps more consideration than she had ever treated any man before. She went even so far as to offer him what, coming from her, was equivalent to direct encouragement. And her altered demeanour was only the outward sign of a marked change in her own feelings. It was not without reason that her detractors had called her cold and passionless; but now, for the first time, she felt a faint but delightful suggestion of something within her more womanly and natural — the stirring of a new emotion, for whose sake it seemed possible to her that she might be content to lay aside some measure of her pride. A sort of shyness came to her sometimes when Bryan's great figure moved through the throngs of people at some reception to her side. She became more interested in the great passionate questions of the day. A certain hardness was wearing away from her mannerisms. She had always been admired; this year she was even popular, and a painting of her in the academy by a great artist was one of the season's successes. She had become so far human as to be conscious of a distinct feeling of vexation at Bryan's non-appearance at Mrs. Forrester's reception. Perhaps had she known exactly where he was, she might have experienced an altogether new sensation.

Bryan had a troubled night after his visit to the Hilarity Theatre, and in the morning he was disturbed and restless. He rose at the usual time, and ordered his horses for the Park; but when they came round, he sent them back again. After all, he felt more like walking. So he set out — but not towards the Park. In less than half an hour he found

himself in Portland Place. He stopped short on the pavement close to the "Langham Hotel," and frowned. Why on earth had he come here? Why did he want to see her again? Then he looked down towards Weymouth Street, and thought of those lonely days she had told him of. A flash of sudden recollection showed him that little scene in the desert, when she had stood beside him with the smoking revolver clenched in her fingers, the saviour of his life; and again he saw himself, sick almost to death in her lodgings at San Francisco, and this woman, pale with privations and suffering, tending him and winning him back to life with dauntless and never-failing devotion. She had done these things for him, and he — because she was an actress, and he was going to marry a great lady — he was leaving her friendless and unhappy in this lone, vast city. A flush of shame dyed his cheeks. He hesitated no longer, but walked quickly on, and rang the bell at number thirty-nine.

Myra was sitting at the table, writing, with some books before her. Her look of surprise changed suddenly into one of delight as he entered, and she welcomed him with beaming face.

"How good of you to come so soon!" she cried, holding out both her hands, and looking up at him with sparkling eyes. "Do you know, I was feeling real lonesome this morning."

He glanced at the books upon the table.

"Studying?" he asked lightly.

"I was reading French," she answered, pushing them away. "I'm dreadfully ignorant! Never mind that now! I'm so glad to see you — and, Bryan, is that how the men dress in London? You look fine!"

Bryan put his silk hat on the table, and laughed. He was wearing the regulation frock-coat and gray trousers, and a

gardenia in his button-hole. In his hand he was carrying a great bunch of Neapolitan violets, pale and fragrant, which he had bought at a florist's on the way. He held them out to her, and she accepted them, with a little cry of delight.

"All the men dress alike, here!" he remarked. "Don't you ever go out?"

She shook her head.

"Not very often! Somehow I feel so lonely here by myself, and the girls at the theatre are very nice, but I don't seem to get on with them. You see, I started with being just a chorus girl, and I don't think they liked my advancing quite so quickly."

"Would you like to go for a drive?" Bryan asked rashly.

"Better than anything in the world! Do you really mean it?"

It was too late for hesitation. He got up and took his hat.

"I'll call for you in three-quarters of an hour!" he said, looking at his watch. "Be ready!"

She took his hands and shook them gaily. "Dear old boy!" she exclaimed. "Kiss me, Bryan!"

He could do nothing else. Then he hurried away, took a hansom at the corner, and rattled back to his chambers. In a few minutes after the three-quarters of an hour he was back in Weymouth Street, and Myra, looking the perfection of dainty good looks, was waiting for him, quietly dressed in a black astrachan jacket and hat.

She went up to the horses with a little cry of admiration, and patted their satin coats. Then she looked up at Bryan with glowing cheeks.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "What lovely horses!"

"Come round here, and get up," he said. "I can't get down to help you, they're a little fresh this morning. That's

right," he added, as she jumped up like a cat, to the seat by his side. "Let them go, John. Steady, Lady Betty! Gently, now! Gently!"

There was a little preliminary prancing, and they were off, rattling up Portland Place. It was a soft, spring morning, and the air was delightful. Regent Street, as usual, was crowded, and once or twice they were blocked. Myra chattered away gaily, and Bryan's turn-out and horses being particularly smart, a good many people looked round at him.

"Who was that lady who bowed to you so oddly?" Myra asked, as an elderly lady, passing quite close to them in an open landau, favoured them with a particularly deliberate stare from behind a pair of "pince-nez."

"It was Lady Warburton!" Bryan answered, frowning.

He had received one or two rather curious salutations, and for the first time it dawned upon him that he was doing a thing likely, at any rate, to excite comment.

"Do you remember driving me out in a buggy in the Central Park, San Francisco?" she asked, laughing. "The horse would run sideways, and you got so cross!"

"Yes, I remember! Why, Myra, do you know Sir George Conyers?"

The gentleman in question had almost stopped on the pavement as they passed, and after a nod to Bryan, had saluted Myra with marked *empressement.* She had returned his bow civilly but coldly.

"Mr. Doyle introduced me to him at the theatre!" she answered quietly. "He was good enough to make violent love to me five minutes afterwards, and wanted me to go to a place called Richmond to dinner one Sunday!"

"Of course you did not go?" Bryan exclaimed.

She looked at him, and he was ashamed of the question.

"No, I did not go!" she said. "I do not like men like

Sir George Conyers, and I guess there must be an awful lot of them in London. In San Francisco a girl has pretty rough times, living alone; but if she's firm, the men don't worry her. In London it is very much harder."

He looked at her inquiringly.

"That is one reason why I do not go out," she continued. "Some of the men who have seen me at the theatre have been very rude to me when they have met me alone. Sir George actually dared to call, and send up his card!"

"What did you do?" Bryan asked.

"Oh, I returned it by the servant, and told her to say that he must have made a mistake. He actually offered the girl a sovereign to show him up! She closed the door in his face, I believe!"

Bryan laughed softly. He knew Sir George Conyers, and disliked him. He knew, too, that the bare association of his name with any woman's was sufficient to destroy her reputation.

"Mr. Doyle should not have introduced him to you," he said. "He is not a nice man for any woman to know."

"I thought not," she answered. "I asked Mr. Doyle not to introduce me to any more people, and he has not."

Bryan turned and looked down at her. They were out of London now — almost in the country.

"Myra, you have been wonderfully discreet!" he said.

"It was because I was sure that I should see you again, Bryan!" she answered softly. "I was waiting for you!"

There was a short silence. Bryan was busy with his horses. Presently he turned their heads homewards, and they were approaching Kensington again.

"There is one place in London, Bryan, that I should like to see so much," she remarked; "I wonder whether we go anywhere near it?"

"What place is it?" he asked quickly.

"The Park!"

Bryan hesitated for a moment and then felt ashamed of himself. Had he been older and wiser in the world's ways, he would have made some excuse, would have promised to take her another day — anything rather than drive down Hyde Park with Myra by his side. But he was only in his noviciate, and it seemed to him that his first impulse was mean. There was only one person whom he prayed that he might not meet, and that was Lady Helen.

"We can go home right through the Park!" he declared. "I ought to have thought of it!"

His hesitation had been only momentary, but she had noticed it.

"Perhaps you would rather not drive there just now, and meet your friends — with me!" she suggested gravely. "I don't mind, really!"

Bryan was quite sure then that his first impulse had been the impulse of a cad. In a wilder land she had not hesitated to offer her life for his; and was he to shrink from showing himself by her side before a crowd of fashionable men and women? He was heartily ashamed of himself.

"Silly girl!" he said, smiling down at her. "I suppose you think I ought to consider the amount of envy I shall excite. I shall do no such thing!"

The remainder of the drive was an object lesson to Bryan, which he did not readily forget. The greetings he received — and for a new man he knew a great many people — varied curiously in proportion to the moral respectability of the saluter. There was no possibility of any one whom he knew failing to recognize him, for he sat up head and shoulders above most of the men driving themselves, a fine figure of a well-turned-out man. There were one or two women who, after a long stare at his companion, looked away from him altogether, but the majority bowed either

coldly, or with a curious expression which puzzled Bryan. Mrs. Colvesson Stuart, who was the leader of a very fast set, nodded knowingly, and laughed in his face; the Hon. Mrs. Esmo Stuart, her cousin, on the other hand, half closed her eyes, and looked away from him with the air of a woman irretrievably shocked. The men were almost effusive in their greetings, although they, too, seemed to temper their cordiality with a spice of wonder. Myra was perfectly well known by sight; in her way her personality was as marked and distinguished as was Bryan's. There was no possibility of any mistake. Mr. Bryan Bryan, the Californian millionaire, and protégé of Lord Wessemer, was driving Myra Mercier, from the "Hilarity." The fact was patent, and to the beholders it had a meaning of its own.

Bryan had driven slowly, out of a certain spirit of bravado; but he was not sorry when they neared the exit. But the worst was not over. At Buckingham Gate a low barouche, with the well-known Wessemer liveries, turned into the Park. Then Bryan knew that what he had been praying might not happen, had come to pass.

For once in her life Lady Helen almost lost her air of serene and lofty composure. Her bow to Bryan was unmistakably haughty, and a bright spot of colour burned in her cheeks. Her eyes met his for one moment. Then she looked deliberately away, and the carriages passed one another.

Myra looked up in Bryan's face.

"Who was that girl, Bryan?" she asked quietly. "You knew her, didn't you? She looked at me as though — as though I were something dreadful."

"That was Lady Helen Wessemer!" he answered. "I don't think she meant to look so!"

She glanced up at him and understood. For his part, he was man enough to hide his feelings, and for the rest of the

way he talked to her gaily. Innately, too, he felt a little rebellious. He did not feel that he had done anything to merit that look of scorn.

He turned towards the Strand instead of westwards, and drove into the courtyard of the Savoy Restaurant. The groom sprang down to the horses' heads.

"Where are we?" Myra asked. "This is not Portland Place!"

He got down and held out his hands to her.

"We're going to get something to eat," he explained. "You don't suppose I could let you go home without any luncheon, do you? John, you can take the horses home. This way, Myra!"

"This is delightful!" she exclaimed, as they walked along the corridor. "Bryan, I'm dreadfully hungry — hungrier than I've ever been in London, I believe!"

He laughed and ordered an extravagant luncheon. They had it served upon the balcony. The sun was almost hot, and even the Thames looked less black and dirty than usual. Myra leaned back in her chair with a little sigh of content.

"I used to dream on the steamer, coming over, of some such times as this," she said. "Of course, I know that they can never come now — not to last, I mean! I wonder — tell me about her, will you?" she asked abruptly.

He lit a cigarette, and watched the sun glitter upon the Houses of Parliament.

"There doesn't seem to be much to tell you," he answered slowly. "As yet, there is no — her. When there is — I hope that you will know her for yourself!"

She sighed, and drew on her gloves. They had already sat for some time over their luncheon.

"Perhaps — most likely, she will not want to know me!" she said. "Don't let us talk about it, to-day! I have been so happy!"

He put her in a hansom at the door, but he did not get in with her, although she moved her skirts for him, and looked up appealingly.

"I shall either see you to-morrow, or write," he said leaning over from the kerb. "Good-bye!"

She smiled at him brightly, and the cab drove off. Bryan threw away his cigarette, and lit a cigar.

"Now for Lady Helen!" he said to himself, grimly. "I'll have it over!"

CHAPTER IV

DEAD SEA FRUIT

It was nearly four o'clock when Bryan turned out of Piccadilly, and rang the bell at Wessemer House. He inquired for Lady Helen.

"I believe her ladyship is not at home, sir," the porter answered. "I will find out."

He went away, and returned again in a minute.

"Her ladyship will see you, sir," he announced, with a respectful bow. "Will you walk this way?"

Bryan followed a footman who had come up, into a small apartment at the side of the house, which was not generally used for receiving visitors. It was empty, but evidently Lady Helen had been there lately. A piano was open, with some songs lying about on the ottoman before it, and a book, face downwards, was reposing upon a small round table by the fireside. A great bowl of flowers gave out a strong, sweet perfume, which Bryan instantly associated with her. He half closed his eyes, and in a moment he could have fancied himself back again in the amber drawing-room at Wessemer Court — alone with her on that first night, when he had come into her presence as Lord Wessemer's guest, and on terms of more than ordinary civility. He felt a distinct thrill of pleasure at the recollection, at the thought of how he had steadily won his way into her favour, fighting her prejudices one by one, always ——

The thread of his meditations was broken. She had entered the room, and was advancing slowly towards him.

"How do you do, Mr. Bryan?" she said gravely. "Lord Wessemer has just gone out."

"I did not come to see Lord Wessemer," he answered. "I came to see you."

She swept past him, and stood on the other side of the tiger-skin hearthrug, looking at him inquiringly. She was wearing a plain, perfectly-fitting gray gown, which fell around her in straight, severe lines, accentuating the slimness of her figure. Her cheeks were a little paler than usual, and there was not even the suggestion of any colour about any part of her toilette. Never had she seemed to Bryan colder or more inaccessible.

"I am sorry that I could not get to the Forresters' last night," he began. "I met an old friend."

"Yes? The — person with whom you were advertising yourself in the Park this morning, possibly?"

Bryan frowned and kicked a footstool away from him.

"Yes," he admitted, "it was Myra Mercier."

"Pardon me — of the Hilarity Theatre, I believe?"

"Yes, she is acting there."

"Ah!"

Lady Helen took a handful of roses from the bowl by her side, and smelt them absently. Bryan felt that he had no particularly easy task before him.

"I knew Myra Mercier in San Francisco," he said slowly. "When I was ill there she was kind to me. I met her last night by accident. She is living alone in London, and of course I wish to be kind to her."

"Naturally!"

Then Bryan suddenly determined upon a bold step. He dismissed the subject, and, suddenly moving forward, stood over her. She watched him, and suddenly felt a

strange thrill. The old fire was in his eyes, and was ringing in his tone. The thrall of his society training had passed away. He was once more the man who had worked this curious change in her sensations, a change which as yet she had not admitted to herself — of which, indeed, she had been but dimly though sweetly conscious.

"Lady Helen, it was not of any such trivial matter that I came to talk to you this afternoon," he said. "I have come to say that the six months you spoke of are almost up, and I am weary of waiting. What I am, you have made me. The desire for you is the better part of my life. I want a little word from you — you know what it is! I am not worthy of you — no one could be — yet I will try to be all that you wish. Will you not try and care for me just a little?"

He was standing very close to her now, and, for the first time in her life under such circumstances, Lady Helen was not entirely mistress of herself. A faint pink colour was in her cheeks, and her eyes had drooped to the roses which she held in her hand. He dropped on one knee, and, taking her other hand, held it softly in his. She did not draw it away, and he raised it to his lips.

"Lady Helen! Helen! Won't you say that little word?"

His deep bass voice was musical with the emotion of the moment, and Lady Helen felt her heart beating more sweetly than ever she had dreamed of. She lifted her dim eyes, and smiled at him.

"Yes, if you will, Bryan! If you are quite sure that you want it very much!"

An hour later, as Bryan was leaving the house, a servant intercepted him. "His lordship would like a few words with you before you go, in the library, sir," he said.

Bryan followed him into the Earl's sanctum. He was writing a letter, but put down his pen as Bryan entered.

"Haven't seen anything of you for a day or two, Bryan," he remarked, directly the door was closed. "Been away?"

Bryan shook his head. "No. I was here on Tuesday. You had gone round to Tattersall's, I think."

Lord Wessemer nodded, and flicked his eyeglass from his eye.

"You've been in to see Lady Helen, they tell me?"

"Yes! I've been with her some time," Bryan answered. "She was good enough to give me some tea."

Lord Wessemer raised his eyebrows.

"Glad to hear it!" he said shortly. "I was afraid that you might have found Helen—a little awkward. I can't say that it was a remarkably discreet thing of you to be driving that little girl from the 'Hilarity' in the Park this morning. Of course these things are done, I know, and I should be one of the last to moralize, but a *liaison* of that sort is best not paraded."

"There is no *liaison* of any sort between that young lady and myself," Bryan answered shortly.

Lord Wessemer shrugged his shoulders.

"As to that I am quite indifferent," he declared. "If you told me that quite seriously I should, I suppose, believe you, but let me assure you of this — not another man or woman who saw you with her in the Park this morning would believe it. I am very sorry that you should have happened to meet Lady Helen. I am bound to say that from her point of view your behaviour was not exactly delicate. I do not know what she may think, but I myself, Bryan, have begun to wonder whether your intentions with regard to her have wavered. I sent for you — to ask you this."

"My intentions with regard to Lady Helen are what they have always been," Bryan answered steadily.

"I am glad to hear it. At the same time, I must tell you frankly that I consider you have materially damaged your cause to-day. And side by side with that unfortunate incident, I have just received a letter from the Duke of Devonport telling me that, with my permission, he proposes to ask Lady Helen to become his wife."

There was a moment's silence. Bryan did not look at all confounded.

"His Grace is too late," he remarked quietly.

Lord Wessemer dropped his eyeglass again, and looked Bryan in the face. Then he held out his hand.

"I am delighted," he said warmly. "When was it?"

"Just now!" Bryan told him. "An hour ago, Lady Helen consented to be my wife."

"I am very glad indeed, Bryan. I have hoped for this! It makes me feel lighter-hearted when I think that, notwithstanding the wrong I have done you, you have been able to win one of the proudest women in England to be your wife."

Bryan looked into Lord Wessemer's face steadily for a moment. Then he rose and stood on the hearthrug before him. The afterglow from a stormy sunset had thrown a strange glare of yellow light upon the faces of the two men. It was odd how the resemblance between them, faint enough at most times, became deepened and intensified in the unnatural illumination.

Then Bryan spoke slowly, and with an impressive distinctness.

"Lord Wessemer, would it make you any happier to know that, though by intention you wronged me and my mother, in reality you wronged neither of us?"

There was a dead silence. Lord Wessemer was bewildered.

"I do not understand you, Bryan!" he exclaimed.

"Listen, then. I have told you of my adventures in California, and of the papers I obtained of the man Huntly, who called himself Hamilton. I also told you that I did not believe that all the papers had come into my hands. I was right. Yesterday I received another one. It is a document, or rather half a sheet of note-paper, written by Huntly. The truth of it I have already ascertained by a telegram to Oxford."

"Tell me what it is!"

"It is simply this. It was not you who deceived my mother. It was Huntly who deceived you. When he married you he had been a priest nearly a year. That marriage was a perfectly just and legal one."

Lord Wessemer sat down suddenly. His face was ghastly pale.

"I do not understand," he faltered. "Huntly was a bad lot. He told me that he had been sent down from Magdalen; that he had not even taken priest's orders."

"He lied! He had been a bad lot, it is true, but he had not been sent down, and he had been a priest nine or ten months, when he married you. His real object was not to serve you, but to get you into his power; to hold this secret over you afterwards as a means of extorting money. This he would have done, but, as you know, he was obliged to fly from the country almost immediately afterwards, and for many years he dared not show himself. When at last he did come back, you were abroad — in India, I think. He came to me, dropped some vague hints when he was drunk, and then took alarm and fled. I followed him to California. You know all the rest. It is very simple."

"My God!"

There was a deep silence between the two men. When Lord Wessemer looked up, the expression of his features was strangely altered. The languid cynicism of the philosopher was gone. His face was gray and strained. He was suddenly an old man. Yet there was a wonderful eagerness in his tone.

"Bryan!" he cried. "You have been cruel to keep this from me a moment. Thank God, there is time to do you justice! You must take my name at once, to-day! I will go and see Lord A ——. You are my son, Bryan! The world shall know it, and shall know how proud I am to own you! This is ——"

"Stop!"

The words died away on Lord Wessemer's lips. Something in Bryan's still, cold face seemed to suddenly chill the glow which had warmed his heart. He was silent.

"Listen!" Bryan said. "You have always borne the name of a proud man. I am your son, and I, too, am proud. I will never take the name to which I am entitled only by an accident. I shall never take any other name than the one I have at present. I will not be any more your son in the future than I have been in the past. I have sworn it by the memory of one whose life was a sacrifice to your — villainy!"

Lord Wessemer forgot at that moment all the tenets which had formed the text of his life. He held out his hands to Bryan, and his eyes were blinded with tears.

"Bryan, have pity on me!" he pleaded. "I have repented, and I am very lonely. I want a son!"

Bryan took up his hat and moved towards the door. On the threshold he paused and looked back.

"There were many years when I wanted a father!" he said slowly. "There were many years when my mother wanted a husband! It is you who sowed the seed of our

unhappiness; you, too, must bear your share of the harvest!"

The door opened and closed, and Bryan passed out into the street. Lord Wessemer was alone.

CHAPTER V

THE PROBLEM OF TWO LIVES

Most men of robust, virile development and healthy turn of mind, have some definite object in life which holds a distinct and prominent place in the shaping of their destinies. And most men, having attained it, find it a very different thing in their grasp to its semblance when it lurked like a vague shadow upon the perspective of their fancy. Bryan had won what years ago had seemed like a wild and impossible dream to him. The woman who had appeared to him as the creature of another world — an altogether superior order of beings — was his. She had promised to marry him. She had even admitted that, in a way, she cared for him, that in his presence she felt for the first time a distinct preference for one of his sex.

The news was announced with all the *éclat* which society journals and society gossip could give it, and on all hands Bryan was warmly congratulated. For several days he could not show himself at either of his clubs without being made the martyr of the same little stereotyped speech, to which he had always to reply in the same manner. One of the first to allude to it, although his acquaintance with him was of the slightest, was Sir George Conyers.

"I suppose Weymouth Street will have to go?" remarked the baronet, with a knowing little laugh, as the two

men stood together for a minute or two. "Poor little Myra! You're a devilish lucky fellow, Bryan!"

Bryan drew himself up, and looked at his questioner coldly.

"I am afraid I do not quite understand you," he said.

Sir George laughed. It was not a particularly pleasant laugh.

"Oh, never mind!" he answered. "Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it. Fact is, I was thinking that if there's any vacancy in that quarter, I shouldn't mind being in the running myself. She's an uncommonly smart little girl."

"Are you alluding to Lady Helen Wessemer?" Bryan asked.

"Lady Helen! Of course not! I mean Myra Mercier, the actress at the 'Hilarity.' I happened to be round at the stage-door one night — little girl in the chorus — when you were waiting for her; and you were driving her in the Park the other day, weren't you?"

"I was certainly driving Miss Mercier the other day," Bryan answered. "She is an old acquaintance of mine; and, pardon me, Sir George, but if you have any remarks to make about that young lady to me, or in my hearing, I shall be glad if you will allude to her with more respect."

Sir George whistled, and turning on his heel, walked deliberately away. Bryan strode out of the club in a towering rage.

His brougham was outside, and he drove at once to Wessemer House. Lady Helen was at home, but seemed surprised to see him.

"How odd of you to come at this time in the morning!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand. "I can only spare you a minute. I am going out shopping. You look worried!"

"Helen," he said impulsively, standing over her, "I am

weary of the city, and of this wretched social grind which all leads to nothing! I am sick to death of it all! Let us go down into the country — to Wessemer Court. Think how glorious these summer afternoons would be, out on the moors or on the cliffs! This London air stifles me. I am sick of it — sick of the lies, and the false pretences, and the brutal selfishness of it all. Let us go where we can be alone together, and not see anybody else!"

She raised her eyebrows, and smiled upon him, as she drew on her gloves.

"My dear Bryan, what has happened to put you out this morning?" she said. "Go down to the country in May! Why, I never heard such an awful suggestion! Whatever should we find to do?"

He drew a little away from her. There was a curious pain at his heart. He was more disappointed than he cared to own.

"It must be as you wish, of course," he answered quietly. "I thought perhaps that you might feel as I do — that a little quiet — I seem to see so little of you just now — might be rather pleasant. Do you care so very much for society then, Helen?"

"I like my place in it," she answered firmly. "I don't think that there is any life which interests me so much as London life. I am looking forward to entertaining for your party, you know, Bryan, when you have made a name for yourself in Parliament. I think that my greatest ambition is to have a 'salon.'"

"A 'salon'!" he repeated.

"Yes, that sort of thing is wretchedly done nowadays," she continued, finishing buttoning her gloves. "I don't know whether I possess the necessary genius, but I shall try. If you are tired of London, Bryan, why don't you run down to the country for a day or two, by yourself?"

Here was another little tug at his heartstrings. He looked at her reproachfully.

"Without you?"

"Why, yes. I do hope that you are not going to be sentimental, Bryan!" she said deprecatingly. "If there is one thing in the world which I detest, it is sentiment. Now, see me into the carriage, please. I have to call for Mrs. Forrester, and I am late already."

He walked at her right hand down the broad steps, and handed her across the pavement to the perfectly appointed victoria which was waiting at the door.

"You are dining here to-night, are you not?" she remarked, as she settled herself back amongst the cushions. "Half-past eight, you know. Au revoir!"

Bryan bowed, and watched the carriage roll away and turn the corner before he moved. Then he followed it slowly westward.

It was not a pleasant walk for him. The pavement around and by his side seemed peopled with the ghosts of his boyish dreams — the ghosts of those passionate longings which had made music in his heart in those days when he toiled on his claim, spade in hand, on the banks of the Blue River. Their icy touch seemed to be on his spirits and upon his pulses, cooling his warm blood, chilling all his hopes and desires. The fair, proud girl who had wandered in upon his vagabond youth to become the desire of his life, was his own. She had promised to become his wife — she, indeed, regarded him, in her way, as a man for whom it was possible to care. Yet when he had told her of those days of his wild love, and of his joy at this final and almost unhoped-for consummation, she had smiled at him indulgently — had listened as though he were speaking in a language which she scarcely understood. And when he had spoken to her of the future, a future which to him seemed to contain noth-

ing but their two selves, she had told him of her social ambitions and her desire for a "salon." Well, after all, he was but a novice in the fashionable world for which he had been striving to fit himself. As yet, things were a little obscure to him. He would never believe — no, he would never dare to believe, that because she was a great lady, she was any the less a woman.

He looked up, vaguely curious as to his whereabouts, and suddenly stopped. Fate had brought him to the one place which, that day at any rate, he would have avoided. He was in Weymouth Street, and only a few doors away from Myra's rooms.

Even then he would have turned and walked away, but for a carriage standing outside her door. Something in the liveries seemed to him familiar, and he crossed the road with a heavy frown upon his face. It was as he had expected: the carriage of Sir George Conyers.

He did not hesitate any longer, but he rang the bell, and inquired for Miss Mercier. "She was in," the servant answered a little doubtfully, and he at once prepared to follow her upstairs. Just as they reached the second floor, the door of Myra's sitting-room opened, and Sir George Conyers, hat in hand, appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, yes. I will not forget. You shall hear from me!" he heard Myra's voice say from inside. Sir George bowed low, and came out, standing at the head of the stairs to let Bryan pass, and nodding to him with a geniality too obviously assumed. Bryan did not take the trouble to conceal the fact that he was desperately angry, and walked past him into Myra's sitting-room without returning his greeting.

Myra was standing with her hands behind her back, looking out of the window. At the sound of Bryan's step she started round, and gave a little cry.

"Bryan!" she exclaimed. "Bryan!"

"Yes, it is I!" he answered gravely. "You seem surprised!"

The sudden flush of colour faded slowly from her cheeks. She looked at him with a shade of defiance in her manner.

"I did not expect you," she said slowly. "I have just had another visitor, you see!"

"Yes, I met him!" he answered gravely.

There was a great bunch of stephanotis and lilies on the table, filling the room with a subtle faint odour. He opened the window, and taking up the flowers, threw them deliberately into the street. She did not attempt to stop him, but she laughed, a little hard, unnatural laugh.

"That isn't exactly polite," she said. "It is not every one who thinks enough of me to bring me flowers!"

"You shall have all the flowers you want, Myra," he answered quietly, "but not from Sir George Conyers!"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Why not from Sir George? After all, I don't suppose he's any worse than the others, is he? Men are all bad! Some are selfish, others are vicious! I don't see much difference! You don't know why he came here this afternoon, do you?"

"I do not," Bryan answered, "but I can guess!"

"Exactly. It is not difficult! He came to tell me what I had already seen in the newspapers — about your engagement — and he did me the honour to invite me to become his mistress!"

"Hound!" Bryan muttered between his teeth. "What did you tell him?"

Myra drew herself up, and turned towards him. She was wearing a perfectly plain, tight-fitting, black serge dress, which seemed to show every line of her supple, sinuous figure.

"I told him that I would let him know," she answered coolly.

Bryan took a quick step forward. Then he leaned with both hands on the back of a chair, and looked at her.

"Yes, I told him that!" Myra repeated. "I —— Oh, Bryan, Bryan, tell me quickly! Is it true?"

Her manner had suddenly changed. The mask of callousness had fallen away. She pointed to the papers lying on the table.

He could not affect to misunderstand her. "Yes, it is true!" he answered.

"And you are not coming to see me any more?"

"I did not say so!"

"But you are not? You love her! You must love her! You cannot care for me, not a little bit — not a little bit. Oh, my God, my God!"

She sank back on the couch, and covered her face with her hands. Bryan sat down beside her, and then there was a short silence, broken only by the sound of her weeping. A curious sense of perplexity came over Bryan. He would have given the world to have taken her into his arms, and comforted her; to have kissed the tears away, and have brought the smiles back to her cheeks. More than once in the old days he had done it. But now there was this new barrier between them, and he could only speak to her from behind it.

After a while he spoke. The silence was becoming unendurable.

"Myra, I am sorry! God knows I am sorry!" he said in a low tone. "I want you to be happy; to find some one who will be good to you, and whom you will care for. But not Sir George Conyers, or any one like him. I know that you are very lonely, dear. I want to alter all that. I am going to speak to Lady Helen. I am going to tell her —

that you were good to me at San Francisco, and I am going to bring her here to see you."

She suddenly dropped his hands, and fell on her knees at his feet. She dashed the tears from her great beautiful eyes, and held his hands tightly.

"Bryan, my love, my love, I do not want to see her. I do not want to see any one in the world but you. Listen! Marry her if you love her so much, but promise that you will come and see me sometimes. Love her most — but love me a little! You must, Bryan, you must! If you will do this I do not mind being lonely. I will never speak to Sir George Conyers, or any one else like that again. But you must come, and when you come you must try and imagine that after all you do care just a little about me!"

She threw her arms around his neck, and drew close to him. Her breath was upon his cheek, her hair even brushed his face, and the perfume of it lingered long afterwards. He caught hold of her wrists and held them firmly.

"Myra," he said, "I cannot come and see you in that way after I am married. I cannot. Listen! Lady Helen shall be your friend. You shall come to us!"

The passionate light died out of her face, but she did not stir.

"You forget," she said. "She is a great lady, and I am only a poor actress — without a character. She will not come and see me. It is you, Bryan, or despair with me. Would it cost you so much to spare me just a little corner of your love?"

"Myra, don't ask me, don't ask me!" he cried. "Lady Helen shall come and see you. She will be kind. You shall not be left alone here, I promise you. Only tell me that you will not receive any more visits from Sir George Conyers."

"I promise," she answered sadly. "I should not have

seen him to-day, but when the girl told me that a gentleman wished to see me, I thought that it was you, and I was so glad that I forgot to ask his name. Won't you kiss me, just once? "

He stooped down and kissed her forehead gravely. The touch of his hesitating lips seemed to chill her. She drew back, and stood looking up at him earnestly.

" Bryan, I don't want you to be deceived in me," she said quietly. " I am not like some girls. So long as I had you, or the hope of you, I could live alone and see no one and be contented. But that is all over now. I am going to be very miserable, and I must have distraction. I must have life and gaiety, and friends and pleasure. I must have all these things to keep me alive, if I lose you, Bryan. There! My only chance is that Lady Helen may come, and that she may be good to me — for your sake. But, if she does not come, Bryan, then you must not blame me, whatever happens. You have cast me off! Whatever happens, it is not my fault."

Bryan dared not trust himself to speak. The problem of this pale, passionate girl and her sundered life was too profound for him. In his heart he felt that her words were true. Lady Helen was his only chance.

He went out into the twilight, and passed through the crowded streets, back to his rooms, like a man in a dream; and she, as soon as the door was closed upon him, threw herself face downwards upon the rug, and sobbed.

CHAPTER VI

LORD WESSEMER'S ADVICE

THERE was a letter on his table when Bryan reached home, with type-written address and foreign postmark. He threw himself into his easy-chair, and lighting a pipe, read it slowly.

"REDSTONE PARK, S. F.

"DEAR PARD,

"Yours to hand. Glad you're getting a good time. Things are booming all around. I've got a firm of lawyer chaps in 'Frisco to make out a sort of statement to show how our investments stand, and if you feel like selling out for five million dollars, I reckon it can be done, for there's a sort of syndicate as 'll buy us up for ten millions, that's five each, and I'm all for selling. The gold fever is cooling, and there'll be no more such dollar-minting as has been, and five million dollars 'll keep me. Now, enclosed is the address of a firm of lawyers in London who are sort of agents for my chaps, and you go and see them, and if you're satisfied, you sign what they call an attorney, and the trick's done. You'll have cash for your share. I shall take half cash, half notes, because I'm on the spot, and can watch things a bit.

"Say, old chap, come over and give us a look-up, won't you? I've been and got married — powerful superior sort of woman, who reckons she's going to lay the polish on me

thick! She's a real good sort, though! I've got a palace built up here, right amongst the mountains. Such a view there ain't nowhere in the States; though it's mostly wild country, and the valley below runs down to the sea. 'Twas built for a chap as stood for a corner in wheat, but he busted, and I bought the place cheap. My! it's fine, I can tell you, and if you'll come right along, there's a suite o' rooms here a sight too grand for me, as 'll fit you down to the ground!

"No more at present. Writing letters ain't much in my line, and I've got a secretary chap as sees to that for me; but I've written this myself, barring the address, as you can well see. Come right along!

"From your Old Pard,

"Pete Morrison."

Bryan folded the letter and put it carefully into his pocket. Then he half closed his eyes, and leaned back. The depression against which he had been battling came over him now with a rush and triumphed. For days and weeks he had been slowly sickening of this new life of his, this wearisome round of society functions, of regulation dress, of dinners, and of crushes. He was weary of the people, and of the platitudes which seemed to form the major part of their conversation; weary of the part which he himself had to play, of the small, insignificant pleasures in which there seemed to him to be nothing virile or robust. The spontaneity of life seemed to him to be choked up and stultified. All that vague longing for the open country, for the breezy solitudes of the mountains and hills, which had come to him only a few hours ago, returned now with a wider and deeper significance as he laid down his partner's letter. The wild freedom of that vast country, and the house upon the mountains, appealed to him at that moment with a subtle and peculiar force. He found himself thinking with a

certain wistfulness of those days of healthy manual labour, and long dreamy nights under the shadows of the Sierras. Life then was a much simpler thing, at any rate, and assuredly a healthier. Yet with a sudden pang he remembered that the most delightful part of the long moonlight nights had been when he had lain down upon the short turf with his face turned to the dimly outlined hills, and dreamed of a fair, proud girl who had stooped to be kind to him in a far-away country, and whom now he had won for his wife. Surely this triumph of his must atone for all, must in the end sweeten the empty days and the flavourless life! And at the thought of Lady Helen, he remembered the crisis which he had yet to face. By every law of common gratitude and humanity, he felt that he was bound to hold out his hand to Myra, to keep her from the dark unfathomable depths into which, without some such aid, it seemed to him that she must surely fall. He himself was responsible for her future! If she fell, the fall would be his; if she sinned, his would be the sin! Alone he could not help her. Only a few months ago there had been one to whom he could have gone with absolute confidence; but that was all over. She was dead! There was only Lady Helen; and though in his heart he told himself that he need have no fear, that when he had laid before her Myra's friendless state and dangerous position, she would be swift to hold out her hand, yet even from his broad and naturally obtuse view of womankind, he saw something of the awkwardness, almost the indelicacy, of the situation.

There was a light tap at the door. Bryan looked up, waving away the smoke which hung around him, and saw Lord Wessemer.

"Not dressed, Bryan!" he remarked, with some surprise. "I suppose you know that you are due at Wessemer House at eight o'clock?"

Bryan started up and looked at his watch.

"I had no idea that it was so late!" he exclaimed. "I'll go at once."

"I'll wait for you," Lord Wessemer said. "I've been to my solicitors, and was rather late, so I thought I'd call for you."

"I shan't be ten minutes," Bryan answered. "Help yourself to cigarettes, and ring for anything you'd like."

Lord Wessemer took a cigarette, and rang the bell for a brandy and soda. A man's toilette is not a long affair, and Bryan rejoined him in less than a quarter of an hour. Lord Wessemer looked at him thoughtfully as he came in.

"Bryan," he said quietly, "you're looking ill! What is it? Town air?"

"I suppose so," Bryan answered listlessly.

Lord Wessemer dropped his eyeglass, and laid one hand on Bryan's shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked. "Better tell me. I am an old man, and I know a good deal more of life than you. I dare say I can help you."

Bryan looked at him for a moment. For once the keen cynicism seemed to have faded out of his face. There was a kindly gleam in the clear gray eyes, and almost a wan smile upon his lips.

"Thanks! I'll tell you as we go in the carriage," Bryan said, with a certain sense of relief. "Perhaps you can give me some advice."

They went out together, and entered Lord Wessemer's brougham, which stood waiting at the door. Bryan did not hesitate, nor did he spare himself. He told Lord Wessemer, in a few rapid words, the entire story of his life with Myra in San Francisco. He laid the whole problem before him without reserve, and with absolute faithfulness, and Lord Wessemer listened with quick appreciation and sympathy.

They were almost at Wessemer House before he had finished, and Lord Wessemer had no time to say much.

"It does seem very hard to know what to do," he admitted, "but there is one idea, Bryan, which you had better abandon, and at once. You must not go to Lady Helen!"

"Why not?" Bryan demanded. "She is a woman, and though she is proud, surely she can stoop to help one of her own sex!"

"Helen is a woman, and a good one," Lord Wessemer answered gravely, "but she has not been brought up in the broadest of schools, and no woman would exactly relish what you are proposing to ask her. You are upon very dangerous ground, Bryan."

"I must take my chance of it," Bryan answered. "It seems to me that the woman whom I am going to marry should owe something to the woman who most surely saved my life. I must not shrink from offending Helen's prejudices when Myra's life depends upon it!"

The carriage stopped outside the broad double front of Wessemer House. Bryan, deeply engrossed with his own thoughts, stepped out, and mounted the steps with bent head. But Lord Wessemer lingered behind for a moment. He had seen what Bryan had not — a girl stepping across the pavement towards a cab which was waiting just in front of their carriage. The face was familiar enough to him, though not in its present aspect. He had seen it wreathed with smiles, and sparkling with a gay seductive vivacity, and now it was very different indeed. He looked after her, and shook his head involuntarily. He could only guess at her errand, but after what he had just been told, the guess was almost a divination. He followed Bryan into the house with a little sigh.

It chanced that they three were alone at dinner. The evening had been reserved for some distant relations of

Lady Helen, who were on their way home from India, and had expected to arrive during the afternoon. But a telegram had come — they were detained in Paris; and for almost the first time since they had come to town, they sat down to dinner alone. If Bryan was grateful, Lord Wessemer seemed equally so. Both men were thoughtful, and Lady Helen, who came in late with a bright spot of colour in her marble cheeks and an unusual gleam in her eyes, only spoke in monosyllables. Directly after dinner was over, Lord Wessemer lit a cigar and got up.

"I hope you will make up your mind, Bryan, to say nothing more to Lady Helen about that matter," he said quietly.

Bryan shook his head.

"I have pledged my word," he answered.

"We might think of some other way."

"There is no other safe way," Bryan declared.

Lord Wessemer shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall leave you alone," he said. "You will have your own way, I can see. I am going down to the club, and on to the House for an hour."

Bryan nodded.

"I shall go to her at once," he said.

Lord Wessemer watched him leave the room, and stood for a moment at the head of the table in deep thought. Then he rang and ordered his brougham.

CHAPTER VII

THE JUDGMENT OF THE EAST

Lady Helen had received two visitors during the afternoon, who had each contributed a share to the collapse of her calm equanimity. The first one had arrived immediately after her return from driving. She was sitting alone at afternoon tea, when a servant announced the Duke of Devonport. She rose and welcomed him with some surprise.

"I had no idea that you were back," she remarked as she held out her hand.

"Nor that I was coming?" he asked quickly.

She shook her head.

"Just as I thought," he continued. "Lord Wessemer has not been quite fair to me."

She looked at him with wide-open eyes. He was a small, dark man, with keen eyes and sharp features. By her side he appeared insignificant.

"Lord Wessemer has not been fair to you?" she repeated. "I do not quite understand."

"Exactly!" he answered. "It is, doubtless, news to you that I wrote to Lord Wessemer a week ago, proposing myself for the honour of your hand?"

She turned a little paler. "It is news to me!" she faltered.

"Exactly!" he repeated. "Lady Helen, I have heard

some rumours which I choose to disregard. As you know, I have been abroad for two years, or I should have made you this offer before. I want you to be my wife! Now, please don't make me any answer whatever at present. There may be complications which a little calm thought may unravel. I shall come in a week for my answer; and if at the end of that time you can say 'yes' to me, you will make me very happy, and I will promise you that the Duchess of Devonport shall never regret it. Good-bye! Don't say anything, please."

Calm and self-assured, he bowed over her hand, and was gone before she could find any words with which to answer him. Lady Helen was left alone in the twilight, to think!

Her second visitor came whilst she was still deep in an unusual fit of abstraction. There was a knock at the door, and her maid entered.

"There is a young lady downstairs, your ladyship, who wishes to see you," she announced. "She has no card, and will not give her name. Parker has sent up to know what he shall tell her."

"Some one for a subscription, I suppose!" Lady Helen remarked. "You had better show her up, Celeste."

Celeste disappeared. In a few moments she returned.

"The young lady, your ladyship!" she announced.

The door was closed again, and Celeste withdrew. Lady Helen glanced up, and remained silent from sheer astonishment. It was Myra who was advancing slowly towards her — Myra, her dark eyes wide open, and fixed upon Lady Helen with a sort of deprecating sadness, and an unusual pallor on her dusky cheeks.

The two women stood face to face: Lady Helen, fair, proud, and impassive, steadily regarding her visitor as though even now she was scarcely convinced as to her

identity; and Myra, with a gleam in her eyes which was almost wistful. When she spoke, her voice shook a little.

"I am Myra Mercier!" she said. "Perhaps I ought not to have come to see you!"

"Perhaps not," Lady Helen answered calmly. "Since you are here, may I ask what you want?"

"I wanted to see the woman whom Byran is going to marry; and he told me that he was going to speak to you of me. I wanted to speak to you first. That is why I came!"

"Mr. Bryan told you that he was going to speak to me of you?" Lady Helen repeated slowly. "Surely you are mistaken!"

The contempt of her words was lost upon Myra. She was too full of her purpose to notice it.

"No, it is just so! Bryan is going to speak to you about me, but he will not tell you everything; and there are some things which I should like you to know. I do not want — any one — to be good to me — without knowing everything. That is why I have come! I want you to know!"

Not a feature of Lady Helen's moved. She stood perfectly still, and listened in icy silence, without a word of encouragement. The pathos in the low, sweet voice, and the dim softness of Myra's eyes, were nothing to her. It was, no doubt, a piece of acting. The only womanly thing about Lady Helen at that moment was the curiosity which prompted her to stand and listen to what this strange, beautiful girl had to say, instead of ringing the bell and dismissing her, as had been her first intention.

"I knew Bryan in San Francisco!" Myra began. "I was desperately poor, and I was desperately unhappy. My husband — I was married when I was very young — had driven me away from him because I would not become his friend's mistress. One night I met Bryan. I had no money

left, not even enough for my night's lodgings, and I was almost starving. He spoke kindly to me, and he helped me. In time, not by his persuasion but by my pleading, he took me to live with him — for a little time. Then, in a few weeks, he left me. He went to the gold-diggings. He was the first man who had ever been kind to me, and I — I could not live without him. I followed him there. It took me many days, and it was over a wild country; but I found him, and then I knew what I had always kind of feared — he did not care for me! He would rather have been alone! He would rather have spent the long evenings, after his work was over, sitting and dreaming of some one in England; it was of you, Lady Helen! But I had come all that way to him, and he could not refuse to take me in. He did it; but it made him unhappy and morose. I knew that he regretted bitterly ever having seen me. And once there was a man shot, and they said it was I, and Bryan and I had to leave. There was a man who hated Bryan, and he followed us out into the desert, and dogged our steps day and night. In the darkness he stole our mules, and we were nearly starved. One night Bryan had the fever, and we had nothing to eat or drink, and the hot sun had made us nearly mad, and this man came stealing up through the shadows; and he would have killed Bryan, but I shot him — I shot him through the heart, and he died. Thank God!"

Myra's arm, which had been slightly raised dropped to her side. Lady Helen drew a little breath. Despite her coldness, the woman's story had enthralled her. A slight shudder passed through her limbs, and her fingers tightened upon the paper-cutter which she held. But her face remained as the face of a Sphinx.

"We were saved by a caravan, but Bryan's fever grew worse. I took him to my rooms at San Francisco, but he grew weaker and weaker. The doctor told me one day that

he would die unless roused by some strong emotion. Then it dawned upon me how I might repay him for what he had done for me. He did not love me, and, alas! I loved him very much; and I made up my mind that I would save him. He had come to America to search for some papers which were to make him rich, so that he could go back to the woman of whom he used to dream on the banks of the Blue River. The papers were in the possession of the man who had been my husband's friend and my persecutor. I went to him, and I made a bargain. It was my soul for Bryan's life. He gave me the papers and money, and I gave them to Bryan. He took them; he was glad to go; and he left me. But when my time came, and I went to this man's house to give myself to him, for once the fates were with me. He was dead! He had been shot by an assassin, and I fled back into the shadows of the city, and my heart nearly broke. I had lost Bryan, but I was free! Then I told myself that I would die. There seemed no other way. The love I had had for Bryan was in my heart always, like sweet, sad music. It was all over, but it should never be debased. I made up my mind to die; but while the poison was in my hand there came a letter. The man who was dead had left me money. I came to England, and I went on the stage; and one night, Bryan saw me at the theatre. He came to see me. He wished to be kind. I had saved his life, and I am very, very lonely here. I do not know any women, and I have not one friend. And Bryan said that the woman he was going to marry would be kind to me for his sake, but I knew that he would not tell you everything, and because we both love him, I came to you!"

Her voice, which had become a little tremulous, but wonderfully soft and sweet, died away, and her eyes filled with tears. She held out her hands to Lady Helen, and took a swift step forwards. But Lady Helen did not move.

"Did Mr. Bryan know that you were coming to me?" she asked.

Myra's hands fell to her sides. Her heart suddenly stopped its wild beating. She looked out upon Lady Helen through a mist of unshed tears.

"Did Bryan know that I was coming to you!" she repeated falteringly. "Why, no!"

"I imagined not," Lady Helen said calmly. "I will do him the justice to suppose that he would have prevented it. If you are sure that you have nothing else to say, I should be glad if you would go away. Your story has not been exactly a pleasant one for me to listen to!"

"A — a pleasant one! I do not understand! Oh, my God!"

Myra's hands were clasped to her temples for a moment. She could not realize it all at once. There was a dull singing in her ears, and the room seemed spinning around her. Only that fair marble face with its two spots of angry colour, and its cruel, scornfully curled lips, seemed steadfast before her eyes. She had rent her heart and opened those old wounds — in vain! She had done this — only to be scorned, and by the woman whom Bryan loved! It was horrible! Was she no longer human, then, because she had sinned? Was she indeed for ever beyond the pale of all kindred with her sex? The sense of her degradation seemed burned into her heart, and she shivered. This woman's voice was the decree of nature; it was the pronouncement of her doom. She was right. She was an unclean thing! She ought not to have come here at all. Her place for ever must be amongst the pariahs of the world. She was mad to have struggled against her fate. The intolerable agony of that moment left its mark upon her life for ever. Yet some faint attempt at justification found its way up from her heart.

"You think that I ought not to have come, that I am

not fit to come to you!" she faltered. "Yet, I loved him dearly. I only gave myself to him because I loved him. It did not seem wrong. Perhaps you think me worse — than I am! There was never — anybody else! I have faced death since — that there should be no one else!"

"I should be glad if you would go away!" Lady Helen said.

For one moment Myra rebelled, stung with a keen pang of hopeless indignation against the fate which seemed dealt out to her by this woman's verdict.

"Oh, you are cruel!" she cried bitterly. "The world is cruel! Is there no mercy anywhere, then? Does a woman's sin live for ever? Is this how you Eastern women judge?"

"I do not judge any one," Lady Helen answered. "By your own showing you have given yourself of your own accord to a man who would have avoided the gift if he could. That fact places you in a certain position, and amongst a certain class. I have rung the bell. Will you be so good as to go away now."

"I will go," Myra answered calmly, choking down a little sob which trembled in her throat. "I am sorry that I ever came. It was a great mistake."

Lady Helen waited until her visitor was gone, and then she went up to her room and locked the door. No one saw her again until the dinner-bell had sounded.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SAVIOUR OF A SOUL

The Earl of Wessemer drove straight to his club, and entering the smoking-room, took up a paper. But he found it a little difficult to concentrate his thoughts. He listened to the odd scraps of conversation which were being bandied around him, and presently he began to talk himself to his neighbour, Sir George Conyers.

They had chatted idly for a few moments about a recent meet of the Four-in-Hand Club, when a servant in the club livery entered, and brought a note to Sir George. He opened it with indifference, but he had scarcely glanced it through before his whole expression changed. Lord Wessemer, who chanced to glance towards him, was surprised and a little repelled by the slow, triumphant smile which had broken over his face, and the bright gleam in his eyes. He scribbled an answer in pencil, and then leaned back in his chair with the letter still in his hand.

"The ways of womankind are wonderful indeed!" he said, with a little sneering laugh. "I was never more surprised in my life!"

Lord Wessemer shrugged his shoulders.

"Anything sensational?" he asked.

"Oh, no! Just a little odd, that's all! There's a girl, an actress, I won't mention her name, whom I consider the

most beautiful woman in London. Well, I've done my best to make her acquaintance. All no good. She was a *protegee*, by-the-bye, of your young friend, and he seemed to be the only favoured one. That girl, between ourselves, has snubbed me horribly, and yet to-night — look here!"

He tore off the signature to the note, and passed it over. Lord Wessemer read it.

"Hilarity Theatre.

"Dear Sir George,

"You have often asked me to go to supper with you. If you have no engagement, I will meet you after the play to-night."

Lord Wessemer returned it without any sign of interest.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Not much! 'Ladies' room at the "Monopole," at a quarter to twelve.' That'll give her time to get back to her rooms and dress first. I shall send my carriage for her. An odd thing, by Jove!"

He strolled off, and left Lord Wessemer sitting looking into the fire. In an ordinary case he was man of the world enough to have dismissed such an episode without a second thought. But this was not an ordinary case. He sat looking into the fire so long and so steadfastly, that one or two of the men around noticed it.

"Getting an old man!" one remarked.

His friend shook his head.

"Lord Wessemer will never be an old man," he said. "He is a combination of the eighteenth century beau and the modern cynic, and I dare wager that he never troubles himself to think of anything more momentous than a new sauce or an old wine. He will always be graceful and

debonair, for he never thinks. He is the very type of refined old age."

Lord Wessemer passed out while they were talking, and stood for a moment in the hall. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He stepped into his carriage.

"Hilarity Theatre!" he said.

The brougham, with its wonderful dark bays, set him down at the doors of the theatre in less than five minutes. He paid for a stall and sat in the back row.

The last act was just commencing. He ignored the performance and watched Myra carefully. There was a bright glow in her cheeks which needed no rouge, and her movements seemed full of a wonderful and sinuous voluptuousness new to her. She had never sung so well, or acted with such verve and daring. The applause was tremendous. But Lord Wessemer watched her without applauding; he even sighed.

Directly the performance was over he walked round to the stage-door, and slipped a sovereign into the doorkeeper's hand.

"I want to speak to Miss Mercier for a moment," he said.

"She has just left, sir," the man answered. "She was in a great hurry this evening."

"Can you give me her address?"

The man gave it him after a moment's hesitation. Lord Wessemer returned to his carriage.

"Weymouth Street, No. 39," he said.

In ten minutes the small brougham drew up outside Myra's rooms. Lord Wessemer saw with relief that Sir George Conyer's carriage was waiting at the door.

"I want to speak to Miss Mercier," he said to the servant who answered his ring. "I shall not detain her long. Kindly show me up to her room."

Lord Wessemer was a man whom no one ever dreamed

of disobeying. The girl showed him up into Myra's sitting-room. It was empty.

"Miss Mercier is changing her dress," she said. "She will he here directly."

Lord Wessemer nodded, and he was left alone. He stood still on the hearthrug, and waited.

His quick eyes wandered round the room. He noticed everything, even the little pile of books, at the titles of which he glanced with a faint smile. There was not a single novel. There were all the modern aids to education, in one form or the other — Glendoroff's method of learning French, and several volumes of critical essays on art and literature. There were some cushions on the sofa, huddled together and crushed, and a handkerchief lying down on the floor. Lord Wessemer sighed. He knew that a very short time ago this room must have witnessed a woman's agony.

She came in at last, dressed for the evening, in a black lace gown with mauve foundation and ribbons, quietly enough compared with the toilettes of dozens of women, but yet in a different style to anything she had yet attempted. The colour on her cheeks, too, was a little higher than usual, and her eyes were unnaturally bright. In her carriage there was a wonderful admixture of the old grace and a new-born voluptuousness. She carried herself with a different air, less feminine and more defiant. Lord Wessemer looked at her long and earnestly. To him she represented the type of a woman deliberately giving herself over to destruction. He was philosopher enough to study her for a moment curiously.

She stopped short when she saw that it was a stranger who confronted her. Lord Wessemer dropped his eyeglass, and bowed.

"I have to introduce myself," he said, in that low, winning tone which he knew so well how to use, "and to

apologize for my intrusion! I am the Earl of Wessemer, and you are Miss Myra Mercier, I believe? Will you allow me?"

He bent over her hand with old-fashioned courtly grace.

"You must not be shocked at my presumption in coming here!" he continued pleasantly. "Remember that I am old enough to be your father!"

She understood him, and was ashamed of the suspicion which had caused her for a moment to retain her hand.

"I do not quite understand," she said. "Have you anything particular to say to me?"

"You think that I have come at a most unreasonable time to say it, don't you? Will you allow me to explain? I won't keep you more than five minutes."

His manner was perfect, as it always was, polished and deferential, but exceedingly kindly. In his presence Myra unwittingly became her old self again. The false hardness of a few minutes ago vanished. She smiled at him brightly, and drew off her gloves. It was a respite.

"Why, of course I will!" she answered. "Won't you sit down?"

She loosened the strings of her heavy opera cloak, and it fell back from her bare shoulders. He took an easy-chair, and she sat opposite to him.

"I know you, and of you," he said, "from Bryan. He has told me a great deal!"

The colour in her cheeks became very real for one brief moment. Then it faded out, leaving her quite pale, save for that one pink spot. Lord Wessemer leaned over towards her, and continued:

"Bryan has told me how nobly you saved his life in San Francisco," he went on, "and also that it was you who procured and brought him those wonderful papers. I want

to tell you something about them, if I may — if you will listen for a few more minutes to an old man!"

"Why, yes, of course I will," she said timidly.

"Those papers were the key to Bryan's history. They were stolen long ago, and they told him — all he was so anxious to know. It was a very sad history. His father committed a great sin — a sin which he has never ceased to repent. He deceived a trusting woman, and Bryan was their son. He was a villain, and, alas! I am he!"

She sat up and looked at him in blank surprise.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You Bryan's father?"

"Even so," Lord Wessemer answered, with bowed head. "I have paid very bitterly for the evil I did. Do you remember this last paper you brought him? It was the most wonderful of all, but it tells how in deceiving his mother, I was myself deceived by a false friend. The marriage which I intended to be a sham one, was a real and binding ceremony. My sin is none the less, but the fact remains. Bryan is really my son!"

"Your own son!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he answered gently. "I am an old man now, you see, and though I have never thought of marrying since those days, I have often felt very lonely indeed, and I have longed for a son to bear my name after me, and to become the head of my family. But Bryan will not take my name. It is his punishment, and I do not blame him! We are friends! I see him every day! But he will not call me 'father'! It is my deep sorrow, and it is always with me!"

He bent his head, and was silent for a moment. Her dark eyes were full of sympathy.

"So you see that I, too, have very much to thank you for," he continued. "It is you who saved my son's life; and I want to know whether we cannot, Bryan, and I, and all of us, show our gratitude in some way. We cannot repay

you, that is impossible! But it would make an old man very glad if you would accept our respectful friendship——"

"Stop!"

She had risen to her feet, and she was looking at him with a curious quivering at the lips.

"Bryan — Bryan came here, and he spoke of — finding a friend for me. He would go, he said, to the woman whom he was going to marry. She would be kind to me, he said, for his sake. But I — I was afraid that he would not tell her all. I went to her myself, this afternoon!"

Her voice suddenly broke down, and died away in a little moan, but she dashed the tears from her eyes and continued. Her face had grown very set and hard.

"She showed me — that I was a very wicked girl. I did not quite understand before, but — she made it very plain. Perhaps you do not know about me, or you would not be here. I was Bryan's mistress! Do you understand? I lived with him. I went to him of my own accord. I was alone, and I loved him; so I went. Perhaps you are sorry now that you came!"

Lord Wessemer took her hand, and held it tenderly in his.

"My dear girl," he said quietly, "I know everything, and if you will give me that honour, I shall be proud to call you my friend. You must not let anything that Lady Helen said trouble you. She has seen nothing of the world, and although she is my ward, I am afraid that she is a little narrow and prejudiced. She has no strong passions herself, good or evil, nor any of those great, sweet impulses which have made you a woman whom I am proud to know. You must not think that Lady Helen's opinions are the world's opinions. The woman who gives herself away for her own advantage is a shameful woman, here and everywhere. But the woman who loves one man so tenderly and so unselfishly that she gives herself to him as you gave yourself to Bryan,

the world of thoughtful men and women has no single thought or word against."

She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud.

"It is too late!" she moaned. "It is too late!"

"It is not too late, Myra! See!"

He pointed to the clock. It struck twelve! Their eyes met, and she was white to the lips.

"You knew!" she cried. "My God! you knew!"

He bowed his head.

"I knew!" he answered. "My poor, dear child!"

She sank on her knees before him, weeping passionately.

"Thank God you came!" she sobbed. "I — I loathed myself so, and yet Lady Helen's words seemed always ringing in my ears, and Bryan was going to marry her, and I was very, very lonely! If I had gone, I should have killed myself afterwards; but I should have gone — if it had not been for you!"

He led her to a chair, and talked to her soothingly.

"We must see that you are never lonely any more," he said. "I ——"

He stopped abruptly, and looked round. The door had opened; Bryan was standing on the threshold.

Lord Wessemer took up his hat, and stooping low, kissed Myra's hand. A single look into Bryan's wild face seemed to tell him what had happened.

"Good-bye, Myra!" he said gently. "Here is some one else come to talk to you!"

He crossed the room, and heard her little cry as she recognized Bryan standing gazing at them in blank amazement. Lord Wessemer dropped his voice as he passed him, and looked straight into his eyes.

"Remember, Bryan," he said, "that you are a Wessemer!"

He walked down the stairs, and stepped into his

brougham. Sir George Conyers's carriage was still waiting, and he put his head out of the window, and beckoned to the footman.

"I don't think you need wait any longer," he said. "There has been a little mistake."

"Very good, sir," the man answered dubiously. "Is there any message for Sir George?"

"Yes. You can give him my compliments — the Earl of Wessemer's compliments, you understand — and say that the note he received this evening was a clumsy forgery. You understand!"

"Yes, my lord."

The Earl of Wessemer leaned back in his carriage, and lit a cigarette.

"It's a d——d odd thing," he mused, as he blew away the smoke, "but if ever I do, or attempt to do a good action, I am certain to be found out. Yet I am glad I went. I am very glad!"

CHAPTER IX

A BROKEN DREAM

For several moments neither of them spoke. Bryan took off his overcoat, and threw it on the table. Then he stood still, listening to the sound of Lord Wessemer's horses, as they sprang forward in the street below, and the carriage rolled away.

"Bryan!"

The sound of her voice seemed to awake him from a sort of lethargy. He took a quick step towards her. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her hair was disordered. Yet, with it all, she was superbly beautiful. In her voice at that moment he seemed to recall something of the wistfulness of those far-away days on the banks of the Blue River, and out in the wild sandy desert.

She held out her hands as though to keep him away.

"No; you must not come near me!" she said, in a low, tremulous tone. "You must keep away from me for ever!"

He did not go. On the contrary, he came up quite close to her. Then she saw that he, too, had been passing through some phase of passionate emotion. His strong face was troubled, and yet eager, and his cheeks were unusually pale.

"You have been to Lady Helen!" she said. "She has told you!"

"She has told me everything," he answered. "I have come straight from her to you, Myra. Now, listen!"

He stood up before her with folded arms, something of the old blunt stubbornness creeping into his face, and betraying itself in his speech. She listened to every syllable. It was the Bryan of those other passionate days who spoke to her — her Bryan.

"I told you in San Francisco that there was a woman in England whom I loved. You remember that?"

She looked at him in mute assent. He did not wait for any other answer.

"I want to tell you about that. I was a vagabond, and she was a fair, proud lady, who only stooped to speak to me because I had saved her life. To me, in those days, she seemed like an angel. In my own imagination I made her an angel. I built up her image in my heart, and the materials were of my own making. The Lady Helen whom I fashioned was my princess, the dream of my days, the desire of my life! Nothing seemed to me to compare with the faint, sweet hope which, in my insane moments, I fondly cherished — the hope of winning her. It was thus with me when I came abroad. You understand?"

She flashed a look at him from her wet eyes.

"I understand," she whispered.

Bryan took a deep breath and continued. It was a joy to him to be speaking thus. He felt somehow as though he had fought his way out of the meshes of some silken net. The sound of his own voice was like a strong tonic to him.

"I met you. In a way you gained a curious influence over me, but I set my face resolutely against it. I denied it. I told myself that there was only one woman in the world for me, and you were n't she. So I left you, ungratefully and brutally, and I came back to England to find myself a rich man. My wealth and Lord Wessemer's influence helped me on. I felt myself at last climbing up on to the same level as the woman of my dreams. The day

"'Are you — quite sure, Bryan?' she whispered."

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came when I attained what had seemed to me to be the desire of my life. Lady Helen consented to marry me."

"Ah!"

She looked away, but he took both her hands and held them tightly.

"From that moment, Myra, I have been a most miserable man. I have not allowed myself to believe it before, but I know it now. The Lady Helen whom I had won was a very beautiful, and in her way, I believe, a very good woman, but she was as far apart from the Lady Helen of my fashioning as Heaven is from Hell. Day by day I found it out. She has lived, and desires still to live, in an atmosphere of her own — an air I cannot breathe. It has made her conventional, proud, and narrow, conscientious but full of prejudices, without passions or without sympathy. For a puppet of noble birth she will make an excellent wife; but she will never be mine. We have parted, and she is going to marry His Grace the Duke of Devonport."

A great wave of emotion swept into Myra's face. She took a quick step backwards, and looked at him as though scarcely yet comprehending.

"To-night came my release," he said. "I spoke to her of you. She interrupted me. You had been to her, and she told me the manner of your reception. She added that she feared that our engagement was a mistake. Our views of life and our tastes were altogether too far apart. And I bowed my head, and my heart said 'aye!' I knew then that my idol was a creature of my own making. She had never existed. My heart was free from her, and, Myra — I found that it was not free after all, for I had given it to you."

He took her into his arms, and with a low, deep cry, she gave herself up to his embrace. The joy of that moment was worth the sorrows of a lifetime to her.

"Are you — quite sure, Bryan?" she whispered.

"Quite sure," he answered confidently. "I am going to take you away into a new and a greater world; and we are going to be very happy indeed."

They sat talking softly together till the streets below were silent, and the fire burnt out into white ashes. Then Bryan tore himself away, and walked homeward through the empty streets, in the twilight before the dawn. From his couch he watched the sun rise slowly over the great slumbering city, and then, with a deep sigh of content, he closed his eyes and slept.

Myra, too, watched it from her lonely chamber window, and the faint silver rays stealing down upon the dark, sad city, were like a sweet omen of the days to come. And indeed their presage was a faithful one. For the sun which had risen in her heart shone there for ever, without any cloud or any twilight.

CHAPTER X

IN THE GREATER WORLD

"At last, Bryan! I can see the buggy and the waggon. Look!"

She passed the glasses to her husband, and he held them to his eyes long and steadily. Then he put them down.

"Yes, he is there," he said.

They stood hand in hand waiting, and the soft west wind came from over the hills and fanned their faces. They were upon the piazza of a dainty little châlet built out upon a ledge of the mountains, and almost overhanging the great Redstone Park valley. Above them towered the snow-capped mountains, and all around, the lower hills lifted their pine-topped heads to the blue sky. At their feet was a wonderful panorama of valley and broad virgin country stretching away in a great plain to the misty horizon. Bryan was wearing a suit of white flannels, and he took off his cap to let the breeze sweep through his hair.

"This is the loveliest spot in the world!" he exclaimed.

Myra laughed.

"And you have never found it dull? You, a man of fashion!"

"Never!" he answered gladly. "We have been very happy here, dear!"

She looked up at him with a soft gleam in her eyes, and a wonderful smile on her lips.

"It is like Paradise, Bryan!" she said. "But I think that we should have been happy anywhere!"

Nearer and nearer drew the little chain of vehicles, making their laborious way up the mountain. Through the glasses they could now see distinctly the figure of their approaching guest.

"Bryan, I have something to ask you!" his wife said slowly. "It is a great thing. I want to ask it you before Lord Wessemer gets here!"

"You'll have to be quick, then!" he answered, smiling. "They're at the bend now coming round the head of the gorge. How well he looks!"

"It is about that thing which he desires so much — that you will bear his name, and call yourself his son."

He shut the glasses up with a snap.

"I cannot do that, Myra!" he said quietly. "I can forgive him, and I can even love him. But ——"

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"One moment, Bryan!" she pleaded. "I am going to raise the curtain, just a corner of it, behind which all is blank for us. You remember — that night. You never quite understood why Lord Wessemer was with me, did you?"

"No, I never did!" he answered.

"I want to tell you! He came to me because, from a man's careless talk at his club, he knew that in my despair I was giving myself over, body and soul, to death. I was mad that night, Bryan, and I had promised — to have supper with Sir George Conyers. Lord Wessemer came to me, and in a few gentle words he made me feel quite a different woman. He came of his own accord, and he saved me! That is why I am angry when I hear any one call him cynical, or *blasé*, or selfish! That is why I shall always love him next to you, Bryan!"

He stooped and kissed her, heedless of the ascending cavalcade.

"I am glad that you have told me this, Myra," he said. "It shall be as he wishes! Come!"

They met on the lawn amongst the flowering azaleas, and under the shadow of the pine-trees, through which were little flower-framed peeps of the valley below.

"I am a reformed cynic," Lord Wessemer laughed, as he held out his hands to them. "I shall sneer at Arcadia no more! It is here!"

Later, as they sat on the piazza, and watched the fireflies dart through the sweet-scented twilight, he spoke wistfully of that great desire which had brought him from England, a suppliant. And Bryan held out his hand through the gathering gloom.

"It shall be as you wish, father!" he said quietly. "Myra wishes it!"

Lord Wessemer bent forward, and through the darkness their eyes suddenly met — Myra's and his. They understood.

THE END.

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